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Did I *Seriously* Just Get
Reincarnated
as My **Gag Character?!**





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“The Labyrinth of Memory”

By Kanade Otonashi

Illustrations by azutaro



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Prologue

A girl stood in a small room. It had a bed, a set of tools for sewing, and a number of stuffed animals. That was all that would fit in the space. She took a step and felt her foot splash into something wet and lukewarm. Her eyes, which had been shut tight from sheer horror, shot open to see fresh blood covering one of the walls. Her heart skipped a beat. Her blood froze as a shiver ran up her spine, robbing her body of its strength.

“Mama...?” she whispered, her voice trembling. She recognized the outfit she’d spotted, now stained bright red. She shook her head in disbelief as she stared. Her foot bumped against something round. “Mama...” she said in a small voice. “Your head fell off...”

Everything was turning red. Not just in the room, but in her mind as well. Everything felt unreal. But the smell of blood, strong enough to make her want to vomit, yanked her back to reality.

“Wahhh...! Papa...!” she sobbed, struggling to speak through her tears. But there was no response. She was alone. All that was there to greet her was a pair of decapitated heads. She could only scream. “Ah... Aaaaaaaaahhh!!!”

“Why?!” she demanded, squeezing her eyes shut and fleeing the room. “Why is this happening?!” She didn’t understand, so she simply escaped. She tried to deceive herself, telling herself that what she had seen wasn’t real—that it was just a bad dream. Her parents would tell her that themselves when they got home.

When they got home...

Yes, that was certainly what they would say.

Repeating those words to herself, the girl ran. Her breath ragged, she pushed her way through the crowd of people, making her way to a small tree standing alone in an empty plot in the back of an alleyway. There was a rickety homemade swing dangling from one of its branches. She sat down and allowed

the wind to rock her.

“No...” she choked out, the weight of her despair crushing her. “I don’t wanna be alone... Papa! Mama!”

“Poor little thing,” came a voice. “Do you want your parents back?” The girl couldn’t see whose voice it was. She couldn’t see anything thanks to the tears in her eyes. But the voice sounded kind. Agonizingly, achingly kind.

She had nowhere to turn except to this kindly voice. She had no reason to continue to live. “I do!” she sobbed. “I wanna see my papa and mama again!”

“Make a wish, then,” the voice said. “I will give you an empty vessel, and you will be reunited with the father and mother of your memories.”

And so, the girl made a wish. She wished to meet her parents again, if only one more time.

Chapter 1: Signs of Unrest

The Yutland River was a mighty river that stretched across the land, its waters drawn from countless tributaries. Before the water dragon had made its home in the lake west of Aquellion, the people had embarked on a journey in search of a source of pure water. They'd found the Yutland River and built a city along its banks. It was a beautiful part of the world where people lived in harmony with nature—the Royal Capital of the kingdom of Sindoria.

The Capital was built in the style of the Empire by magic construction teams, and it had a large force of mages tasked with controlling the water's flow. It was a splendid city that many called the Second Capital of Water, the first being Aquellion. Deep on its north side, it housed the Royal Palace, the symbol of the power held by the oldest of the human kingdoms. If you were to ask a random person in the world to name a kingdom, Sindoria would probably be the first to come to their mind.

The innermost building of the palace cut a magnificent silhouette with its panoply of nearly a dozen spires. Its walls were as white as alabaster, with brilliant blue decorations to contrast with them. It looked like nothing short of a cut gem.

Lords and nobles made their way out of the palace, their faces weary as they left His Majesty Sindoria the Eighth alone on his throne.

"This has become quite the headache, hasn't it?" he muttered with a heavy sigh, looking over the letter in his hand. They had just held a serious meeting about that letter, which had been sent by the neighboring kingdom of Estoll. Its contents were quite straightforward. "Then Estoll would make war on our kingdom?"

Frankly, Sindoria the Eighth had not had even the faintest inkling that Estoll was preparing a declaration of war. None of the lords or ministers in his government had either. His spies had heard unverifiable rumors that Estoll's young prime minister had been busy breathing new life into its industry, but

nothing that suggested that war had been imminent. They hadn't even heard anything to suggest that Estoll was expanding its military, leaving them at a clear disadvantage against Sindoria. But most importantly, Estoll and the kingdom of Sindoria were strong allies.

The alliance had been formed at first in order to resist the Empire and its might. In the present day, however, the Empire was bound by a nonaggression pact, and Estoll and Sindoria's relationship had become that of close trading partners and friendly kingdoms. The king of Estoll himself had visited Sindoria not long ago, just as people of both kingdoms frequently traveled from one land to the other. There was no way Sindoria the Eighth could have foreseen the declaration of war, but there it was in his hand.

"What is to be done, I wonder..." Sindoria's military was ten times larger than Estoll's, or perhaps even more. It was unthinkable that they would lose the war, but Sindoria the Eighth was of the mind that war brought only bitter fruit. The two kingdoms were separated from each other by a mountain range, so even if his armies were to crush the Estoll invaders and take over their territory, all he would obtain from victory would be a detached and therefore unmanageable holding. Moreover, the Holy Land forbade using military force to expand one's kingdom. War would only serve to hurt Sindoria. The best thing to do would be to end this inexplicable war quickly and use the subsequent negotiations to improve trade between the kingdoms.

"Quite the headache indeed..." the king said. He couldn't believe that everything had fallen into disarray so quickly despite it having been going so smoothly not long before. He clutched the letter tight in his hand—the letter that had been the cause of so many sleepless nights.

Just then, a girl stepped into the room. "I must say, my lord father, I do not see the need for such grim theatrics."

"Eavesdropping again, Theresa?" Sindoria the Eighth asked, furrowing his brow.

"Heavens forbid!" Theresa answered, smiling with perfect innocence. "I would never stoop to such vulgar means. I simply came to bring my hardworking father a cup of mint tea and happened to hear a little of what your

ministers were saying. They were shouting so loudly, after all.” Her expression shifted smoothly to a look of mortification on behalf of the ministers. “Would you care for a cup?”

“Fine.” Sindoria the Eighth found his daughter’s habits extremely vexing, but he knew better than to think a lecture would change her behavior. He had learned that the hard way.

The kingdom’s second princess, Theresia von Cynthesia, was the most brilliant of all Sindoria the Eighth’s children—and also the most troublesome. But secretly, deep down, she was a kind girl who cared deeply for her family and supported her father as best she could.

“Out with it, then,” the king said. “What are you scheming this time?”

“What a thing to say to your precious, adorable daughter!” Theresia shot back, making a show of putting on an indignant pout. The truth, however, was that she had a long history of prior offenses. When she was seven, she had grown bored of the sweets available in the palace and selfishly used her royal authority as princess to raise funds, which she used to form a company dedicated to the creation of new kinds of sweets. It was only after sweets bearing the princess’s seal had already inundated the marketplace that she had told her father what she’d done, at which point it was a *fait accompli*.

In the years to come, she would do everything from misappropriating royal funds to illegally exterminating unruly nobles to ruining harvest festivals. And yet, the king couldn’t entirely dislike her troublemaking streak. After all, she worked hard for the good of the kingdom. When she was as young as twelve, the minister of finance had asked her to take over his post when he retired. For a girl like her to appear in front of the king now must have meant that she had some sort of scheme in mind.

“My lord brother said something curious,” she remarked. “He claimed that this is an opportunity to put the useless nobility to work—that Margrave Reinholt would serve well enough as commander. In that case, it should be a simple matter to divert the appropriate funds.” She brought her cup of tea up to her lips and blew a puff of air to cool it down before taking a sip. She was clearly enjoying herself. “I know nothing of war, though. Perhaps it is not my

place to give counsel.”

“So you say, but you’ve already done the calculations, have you not?”
Theresia might have lacked experience in martial affairs, but there were none who had a keener eye for profit and loss than her. Her father was certain that she already had a plan of action.

It wasn’t a bad idea to use this war as an opportunity to build combat experience among the nobility, who had known peace for many long years. With victory seeming like a foregone conclusion, they would certainly flock to the battlefield in search of glory. Those who fought well would win fame and influence, while those who showed themselves to be incompetent could be flattered with a simple sum of money and sent off to the front lines. Sindoria the Eighth suspected that his daughter’s plan was something along those lines. She must have come to him looking to raise funds. She had already been making arrangements.

“So, what is it you want from me, Theresia?” the king asked plainly.

“Ah ha ha,” she laughed. “I can’t deceive you, can I, my lord father? I do have a request, if I may be so bold.” She smiled up at him just like she had as a little girl whenever she’d wanted something. Those words had preceded so many troublesome escapades...

“Speak.”

“May I take a vacation to Free Market City to—”

“You may not,” Sindoria the Eighth said, cutting his daughter off.

“Foiled again...” said Theresia. “But my lord father, I’m so terribly bored shut up in the palace all day! Won’t you allow me to take a vacation? A business trip, if you’d prefer.”

Because of her habit of making trouble, Theresia had been confined to the palace for the past year. Her father had been trying to find her a suitable fiancé—it would be a great weight off his shoulders as both a king and a father if Theresia were to get married. But the princess had declared that she would only marry a man more capable than herself, and no candidates had yet been found.

“Of course, it won’t *just* be a pleasure trip,” she continued. “You need only give me permission and I will bring an end to your sleepless nights. I shall resolve the kingdom’s money troubles in one fell swoop. Oh, and I already have the permission of my lord brother and the finance minister.” Theresia handed her father a stack of papers.

It had only been two days since the declaration of war had arrived from Estoll, but Theresia already had a perfect grasp of the tactical situation and had pulled strings with those whose authority she needed. She didn’t just have her brother’s signature, but the signatures of the ministers of defense, finance, and agriculture as well.

Sindoria the Eighth was speechless before the array of names. Perhaps she had meant it as a surprise, but this was the first he had heard of what his daughter had been doing. As busy as he was, going around his back like this was nearly tantamount to an insult to the crown.

“You...”

“Ah ha ha ha ha!” Theresia laughed. “I’m happy to see I can still surprise you! Keeping secrets from you is heart-pounding, my lord father.”

Would a man ever be found who was more capable than this girl? And how shameful was it that after twenty-four years of presiding over the smoothly functioning government from his seat on the throne, the Philosopher King Sindoria the Eighth found himself so vexed and stymied over an unruly daughter, of all possible things?

“It seems you’ve prepared well this time,” he said.

“But of course! It has been far too long since I’ve had a chance to visit lands abroad! I have no intention of letting this go.” To the kingdom, it was a serious affair, but to her, it was mainly an opportunity to leave the palace. She smiled dryly. “And besides, there is someone whom I wish to meet. I am afraid that I am going to Free Market City with your permission or without it.”

Sindoria the Eighth was surprised to hear such a strong declaration from his witty and resourceful daughter. It was rare for anyone to hold her interest and even rarer for her to state as much so plainly. Only His Eminence of the Crimson Empire, the White Knight of the Holy Land, and the Living God—few enough to

count on a single hand—had ever accomplished the feat.

As it happened, though, Sindoria the Eighth had a feeling he knew who the person in question was. “I see...” he said. “You wish to meet the subject of all those rumors, I take it?”

She was a champion who had made her name in the Battle of the Dragon. Acknowledged by both of Free Market City’s ever-feuding great noble houses, she was a person very much worthy of attention. She had appeared suddenly and very quickly became the second S-Rank adventurer in the kingdom’s history. People said that she was half dragon.

“Yes, I should very much like to meet her! Lady Nacht, the Champion of Free Market City...”

‡

“No more!” Aisha begged with a pained expression, tears floating in her eyes. “I can’t... I can’t handle any more, Mistress!”

Nacht, however, just grinned at Aisha’s protests. “There’s still a bunch left to go,” she whispered, leaning in so her mouth was practically touching her servant’s pointed ears. It sent a small tremor of shock through Aisha’s body. “Don’t worry, Aisha. I know you can handle it. Just relax and let the tension out of your body.” She reached out and patted Aisha on the head.

Aisha’s eyes closed halfway, a smile coming over her face. She had been working very hard. “Ahhh...” she sighed. “Mistress, not now... It feels too good...”

“Ah ha ha,” Nacht laughed, stroking Aisha’s hair. “Having trouble focusing?” Then, with a mighty *thud*, Aisha answered the question by face-planting directly onto the book on her lap.

“I’m sleepy...” she muttered, her voice muffled by the tome’s pages.

The two were in the Great Library in the central district of Free Market City. Trade had brought with it a tide of written works from all over, most of which had found their way here. This was a repository of knowledge, boasting more than two hundred thousand books and documents.

“Well, no use trying to force it,” Nacht said. “There’s no getting around memorization when it comes to studying language, but if you try to cram it all in at once, you won’t remember any of it. With history, you can have fun listening to stories of old times, and with magic, you can play around and try spells. Simple memorization isn’t a very efficient way to learn.”

Aisha sighed deeply, looking at the massive pile of books they’d accumulated. Nacht, however, seemed like she was having fun. Aisha might not have seen it, but the two of them were alone. And as long as they were alone, as far as Nacht was concerned, even studying could be tremendously fun.

“Studying is hard...” Aisha said, her ears drooping expressively. “I wasn’t any good at it when my father tried to teach me reading and writing and math either...”

Thinking she might be able to give the girl some advice, Nacht took the textbook Aisha had been reading—an introduction to magecraft. She pored over it in two or three seconds, then closed it. “Hm,” she said. “This book uses lots of difficult language. And it’s full of pointless bits if all you want is to learn how to cast spells. Maybe we should try this book instead? *Magic Made Easy: Even a Monkey Can Do It...?*”

Aisha took one look at the new book and wrinkled her face in revulsion. “Now you’re just making fun of me...”

That hadn’t been Nacht’s intention at all. The author of the book was unknown, but it explained how to cast various spells in a very simple manner. Nacht thought it might help Aisha in her goal of learning how to use magic herself. “Not at all!” Nacht said. “I just don’t see much use for all the theory nonsense. It doesn’t seem that important. Nobody ever taught me this stuff, and I can cast spells just fine!”

“That’s because you’re you, Mistress...” Aisha sighed again and returned to glaring at the book.

It had been two weeks since the Battle of the Dragon, and peace had returned to Free Market City. The two great noble houses had thrown a grand victory celebration, and the city had become even more lively as people wheeled and dealt over the spoils of war—components harvested from the vanquished

monsters and fire dragon scales left behind on the battlefield. They had suffered great losses, but the merchant city stubbornly kept to its ways. Things had gone almost entirely back to normal.

Aisha had spent most of that time training herself, determined to be more useful to her mistress. Nacht was anxious for Aisha to get stronger too, but for a different reason—her conceited pride had already led to Aisha being attacked by a dragon, narrowly escaping death.

Aisha had been busying herself with training and helping out with daily tasks as well. Her attempts at cooking had only resulted in disaster, and she still had the bad habit of squeezing her eyes shut during combat training, but Nacht was proud just to see Aisha working so hard. Most recently, she had started going to the library to study. She was working as hard as she could, but Aisha's memory had always been poor, so the work was slow going. Inevitably, she would doze off not long after starting. But Nacht didn't have a problem with that either. After all, it was a great opportunity to see one of the greatest blessings in existence: her cute Aisha's sleeping face.

She was poring over a genuine magic tome again today with great difficulty, shooting looks of envy at her mistress as she read. "Nobody ever taught you magic, Mistress?" she asked. "How did you learn how to cast spells, then?"

Nacht gave the question some thought, comparing her old memories to her current self before she spoke. "Magic is just a power everyone has," she said. "It's just a name for all the various ways you can use mana. As long as you can control the mana in your body, you can cast spells. You don't need to know theory at all."

Aisha herself had lashed out at the fire dragon using her own mana. It may have been crude, but it was undeniably a spell.

Everyone had their own method of using magic. The most mainstream approach was to imbue one's voice with mana, manipulating its flow through incantation. Even Aisha had done that during the battle, unconsciously imbuing her voice with magic power when she had summoned a spirit to aid her. She could do it if she let go of her thoughts, but Aisha was serious to a fault and insisted on doing it properly. She was doing her best to memorize the whole

entire book, as if she were worried she might fail a school test.

“Even with you teaching me, Mistress, I still can’t do anything without the spirits’ help...” Aisha seemed demoralized, but Nacht saw no reason to be pessimistic about her progress.

“You have elven mana *and* dragon mana, you know, Aisha,” she said. “It makes sense it’s a lot to get a handle on. And what’s wrong with asking the spirits for help? Your spirit magic is something to be proud of!” Nacht, after all, was part of the majority of the population who was *not* chosen by the spirits. From her point of view, spirit magic was a skill she could never master.

“Maybe,” Aisha said. “But that’s just because the spirits are so incredible! I want to be able to use magic *myself*, so I can be more and more useful to you, Mistress...”

“Ah ha ha! Well, I guess you’ll just have to keep practicing. I’ll help as much as I can, of course!” Nacht petted Aisha’s head and handed the disorganized jumble of books they had been using back to the woman waiting on them. The woman made an aggrieved face, but Nacht shot her a glance and she went off to shelve the books, her body shaking with fear.

“M-Mistress...” Aisha began. “I really, *really* don’t want to ask this, but that woman you’ve been ordering around... Didn’t I see her at the victory party?”

She had been pretending not to notice, doing her best to act like she was alone with her mistress, but in the end, she had to know where Nacht’s new gofer had come from.

“She’s the one who helped us reserve this section of the library, you know!” said Nacht. “And now, she’s waiting on us out of the goodness of her heart.”

“It’s hard to believe that *she*, of all people, would be waiting on us,” Aisha said. “She seemed really important from that speech she gave. Are you sure this isn’t a dream?”

The woman—none other than Elenora Ruttie Lenvell—returned with a book, startling Aisha into silence by addressing her directly. “If you’re interested in magic, my lady, I would recommend this book,” she said.

“I’m dreaming...” Aisha repeated. “This is definitely a dream...”

Elenora was the head of one of the two great noble houses that governed Free Market City. She was a proud noble who considered commoners beneath her. For her to be acting like a tutor to someone like Aisha seemed utterly absurd. Aisha faced the other way.

“This is a dream...” she repeated to herself once more. “I’m dreaming...”

But alas, it was reality. “Does the book displease you, Lady Aisha?” Elenora asked. “In that case, might I recommend this one?”

“Whyyyyy?!” Aisha wailed. “Mistress! Why is Lady Elenora addressing me like *I’m* the noble?! I don’t understand! What’s happening?!” This was beyond what she could tolerate. She seized Nacht by the shoulders and shook her.

“Well, you’re my servant, aren’t you?” said Nacht. “I think it makes sense for her to call you ‘my lady.’”

“That isn’t what I asked!” Aisha protested. “Please! Tell me what’s going on!”

“Ha ha ha!” Nacht laughed, a huge grin on her face. “Calm down, Aisha. It’s not that big a deal!” Elenora noticed Nacht’s smile and once again began to tremble. “It’s just a bit of punishment—and a bit of education.” Aisha’s face twitched.

Next to them, Elenora began to ramble. She seemed nauseous with fear. “The face...at night... No! Stay away! The sky! The sky! Oh, please! Please don’t kill me!”

“What did you *do*?” asked Aisha.

“I just gave her what she deserved for attacking my Aisha *twice*,” Nacht said. “But if you want to let her go, I’ll be happy to leave her to her devices.”

Elenora looked imploringly at Aisha and bowed her head. “My lady...” she said. “Please, forgive me for harming you! I was such a fool!”

“S-Stop! Cut it out!” Aisha said, looking pitifully at the groveling noble. “It’s okay! I forgive you! I’m not sure what you did in the first place, actually...”

“Well, isn’t that nice,” said Nacht, turning toward Elenora. “My Aisha is so magnanimous, isn’t she?”

Elenora breathed a sigh of relief. “Y-Yes,” she said. “But I would still like to

apologize. I tried to steal your ring from you, and then I sent my knights after you to try to save face. If there's anything I can do, you must simply ask. Just please keep your mistress away from me..."

"Hm," said Nacht. "Seems like she hates me, huh?" It struck her as unfair after she had given her this chance to apologize.

"Mistress, you mustn't be so cruel to people!" said Aisha. "Um, Lady Elenora? I had Mistress and the spirits protecting me, so I didn't really notice that I'd been attacked. I'm not really upset or anything. And I'll have a word with Mistress about harassing people..." Aisha seemed to sympathize with Elenora's experience running afoul of Nacht. Nacht, who seemed like she was being pegged as the bad guy in this situation, simply shrugged and rolled her eyes.

"Thank you, Aisha," said Elenora. "If you're ever in trouble, don't hesitate to come to House Lenvell. I will do everything in my power to assist you."

Aisha still looked troubled by Elenora's obsequiousness, but the authority she possessed would be very convenient. It was that very authority that had earned them a private room in the library. Elenora certainly had her value as an ally.

"You can use the library whenever you want, of course," Elenora continued as if sensing what Aisha was thinking. "I may be a bit busy in the near future, so I can't always accompany you like this, but I'll have a document written up with the authority of my name. It should be enough to get you into most official city buildings."

"You will? Thank you so much!" Somehow, the two had become something like friends. Elenora had tried to kill Aisha not long ago, but now, they were talking cheerfully, completely ignoring Nacht.

Nacht found the situation irksome. Irksome enough that she accidentally let a tiny bit of her animosity toward Elenora slip.

"Eek!" Elenora cried, sensing Nacht's displeasure.

"Mistress! Cut it out!"

"Gh..." Nacht protested. "But...!"

"I've forgiven Lady Elenora," Aisha said. "Please try to be nice to her."

“Fine...” Nacht grumbled before falling silent.

Elenora gasped in surprise at the sight of Nacht cowed by her servant’s argument. “Aisha,” she said, “aren’t you afraid of her? She’s so terribly strong.”

The words had come out of nowhere. Nacht suddenly felt afraid herself. But Aisha answered without missing a beat. “I’m not afraid in the slightest!” she said. “She’s amazing and powerful and even godlike, but Mistress is still only herself. She’d never hurt me.”

Nacht felt her heart fill with gratitude. She could hardly hold it in. She stepped closer to Aisha, who was still sitting down, and Aisha looked up at her. Somehow, she seemed even cuter than normal. Nacht squeezed her tightly from behind, wrapping her arms around the girl and nuzzling her face into the back of her head.

“Weh!” Aisha exclaimed. “M-Mistress?”

“Oh, Aisha. You really do always know what to say. Thank you. I’m so lucky to have you. I can’t imagine how I could possibly be any luckier...”

She looked ridiculous, but there was no helping that. Not when Aisha was being so precious. She may have been thrown into an unfamiliar world, but Nacht was still Nacht.

“Weeehhhh...” said Aisha. “Um, I don’t really get what you see in me, but I feel lucky to have you too, Mistress...” The two looked into each other’s eyes, drawing closer. They were so close that, for a moment, Aisha thought their lips would meet. But then, she caught a glimpse of Elenora standing to the side out of the corner of her eye and blushed furiously, scrambling out of Nacht’s arms.

“If I’m in the way, I can leave...” Elenora offered.

“N-No! It’s okay! I-I need to study anyway!” Aisha hastily buried herself in a book. Nacht was disappointed to no longer have Aisha in her arms, but her warm words still lingered in her heart. She couldn’t imagine any greater happiness.

As Aisha reapplied herself to her studies, Nacht began idly leafing through a book and intermittently staring at Aisha. The room grew quiet enough for the three to hear each other breathe.

“There’s something I’d like to ask...” Elenora said, breaking the silence. Nacht glanced over to look at her. “How long do you intend to stay in this city?”

“Why?” Nacht asked, a note of sarcasm in her voice. “Wish we’d hurry up and leave?”

Elenora shook her head. “On the contrary,” she said. “I was hoping you might use your abilities for the good of the kingdom. Would you consider settling here permanently? I could arrange for you to be elevated to nobility, which would merit you a domain and a manor.”

Nacht smiled at Elenora’s words. She had tormented Elenora so badly that the sight of her was a trauma trigger for the woman. She knew perfectly well that Elenora would have preferred to never see her again. But Elenora had the ability not to let her personal feelings affect her eye for profit. It seemed that what people had said of her was true—that she was a talented woman outside of her excessive love of jewels.

“Sorry, but I’m not interested,” said Nacht.

“Ah,” said Elenora, unsurprised. “I thought that might be the case. Then, how long do you intend to stay?”

“Hm...” Nacht ruminated. “Well, I’m not in any hurry. I was thinking of just taking it easy with Aisha until we figure out where we’re headed next. But I’m not planning on staying here either.”

“I see. So you’ll be in this city for some time, at least. In that case, may I ask a simple favor?” Elenora faltered, and Nacht gestured for her to continue. “There is a very esteemed guest who would like to meet you. She’ll be arriving the day after tomorrow. She just wants to talk, it seems. Would that be acceptable?”

If it was someone so lofty that even Elenora regarded her as an “esteemed guest,” Aisha would almost certainly say no to the meeting. For Nacht, the prospect sounded like a pleasant enough diversion, but if Aisha were to veto it, she had no intention of forcing the matter. She figured the most expedient way to settle it would be to ask Aisha directly.

“What do you think, Aisha? Do you wanna meet her?”

“Zzz...” Aisha responded, clearly asleep. “Mmkay...”

“Well, if Aisha says it’s okay, it’s all right with me!” said Nacht.

Elenora seemed like she wanted to object, but she bit her tongue. It seemed like Nacht’s assent had been a weight off her shoulders. Her simple favor must have been a matter of some importance. In that case, Nacht thought that perhaps she should set some conditions of her own.

Nacht rested her hand on Aisha’s head and softly petted her hair. Aisha seemed to be fast asleep. “On one condition,” Nacht said. A shiver of fear ran through Elenora’s body. “Don’t worry. It’s nothing like what I had you do before...”

‡

A-rank adventurer Krista Niese Branrichter stood in a room in the Adventurers’ Guild, illuminated by moonlight. Her hair was a nigh-translucent blue and her eyes shone with a cold light. Hers was an elegant, domineering presence. She was a powerful combatant who struck fear into the hearts of men.

“Thank you for your efforts, Irena,” she said in a monotone. “You’ve been a tremendous help.”

Irena, for her part, knew better than to be afraid. Despite her formidable appearance, Krista was a bottomless font of kindness. The truth was that deep down, her personality was more childlike than anything.

“This is a special case, you know,” Irena replied. “I’m letting you have this information because it concerns Aisha’s family. Ordinarily, we have a policy of strict confidentiality regarding our adventurers.”

“I understand. Thank the guildmaster for me as well.”

Krista had been an upperclassman to Irena at the Royal Magic Academy. She had been one of the few nobles to take Irena’s—a commoner’s—side. On top of that, the better half of Irena’s experience and wisdom as an adventurer had come from her.

“I know it’s unusual for you to make exceptions like this,” Krista continued. She knew that Irena wanted to help, but Irena wasn’t the type to let personal feelings interfere with her work. If she had been, she would never have been

picked for the job of vice guildmaster.

“I’m happy to make exceptions if there’s adequate reason. Besides, Aisha is Miss Nacht’s servant. We owe her at least this much for her help.”

Nacht’s assistance had been invaluable in the Battle of the Dragon. She’d driven off an ancient demon and a rampaging dragon, and healed the adventurers who’d been injured in the fighting. Some among their number had even started to worship her as a god. Moreover, thanks to her charming personality, her popularity among the residents of the city had skyrocketed. Even Elenora, who until recently had seemed determined to make an enemy of Nacht, had relented and begun waiting on her hand and foot. The guild had a duty to see to her desires, even if it took a little bit of extra effort.

“Serious-minded as ever, I see. Although it seems you’ve become at least a bit more flexible,” said Krista. But she was wrong. Irena was simply loyal to the guild. Other than that, she wasn’t a particularly stubborn or over-serious person.

Irena thought about arguing, but Krista was someone she found it hard to speak back to. Instead, she simply nodded. “Incidentally, Krista,” she began, hoping to phrase her question as delicately as she could, “I hear you’re planning on taking your leave of Free Market City. I suppose you’ll be joining the war effort?”

“Quick on the uptake as always, I see,” Krista responded in her usual monotone. “I suppose that’s the Adventurers’ Guild for you. You have the right of it. I’m joining the fray—albeit as a noble. If that goes against guild regulations, I don’t want to hear it.” A hint of menace crept into her voice, but Irena recognized it as a joke.

“Nobility seems like it’s more trouble than it’s worth,” Irena opined.

“I quite agree. But as long as I’m fighting to protect the people, I will go where I’m needed.”

“Ever the do-gooder, aren’t you?” Krista merely raised an eyebrow at Irena’s quip. “Well, come back soon. We’ll have lots of difficult jobs waiting for you!”

“Gargore eggs for cheap! Three copper apiece!”

“Today’s special is honey rabbit flank! How ’bout it, miss? Care for some stewed honey rabbit for tonight’s dinner?”

“Eggs Castella from the Royal Capital! They bear the princess’s seal! Get ’em while you still can!”

The voices of merchants hawking their wares filled the city’s marketplace. The place was never short on people, but today, it was even more crowded than usual.

“This place is always so busy...” Aisha said.

“Seems like the kingdom’s princess is coming to pay a visit tomorrow,” answered Nacht. “I guess they’re counting on a lively welcome being good for business.”

“Th-The princess? Her Highness?” Aisha asked, becoming a bit too excited for a moment. “I-I might like to see her myself, if only a glimpse...”

“The city’s gonna put on a whole big welcome for her,” Nacht said. “I’m sure you’ll have an opportunity to see her.” The city already felt like it was putting on a festival. In fact, the princess was planning on having at least one parade. Anything less would disappoint the people of the city.

As they walked through the market, a horde of old men and ladies began to mob around Nacht, pushing their products onto her.

“Goodness, if it isn’t our darling Nacht! Our oranges are very good today, you know!”

“Oh?” said Nacht. “Then I’ll take a crate!”

“Oh, little Nacht! I have lots of fresh vegetables today! They’re good fried or stewed or even raw!”

“Ah ha ha! All right! Gimme a crate of each!”

In the game, Nacht had always sworn by the principle of keeping her inventory stocked with full stacks of every type of item she could find. The guild had given her an appropriate reward for her activities, and she could think of no better use for it than doing the same thing here as well. At least, that was the

story she told to excuse her habit of impulse buying.

Nacht left the last shop, fresh tomato in hand, distantly considering their options for the night's dinner. Normally, Aisha would have scolded her for buying too many ingredients, but today, she was following along with a vacant expression on her face.

"What's wrong, Aisha? Something got you stressed out?"

Aisha smiled, hiding the complicated emotions in her heart. "Of course something does," she said. "I'm just a common townspeople, you know. Talking to nobility always makes my heart feel like it's going to burst out of my chest..."

That was the complaint Nacht was expecting, though Aisha's protests lacked their usual heart. She was certainly telling the truth—meeting nobility *did* make her nervous. But there was something else that was causing her anxiety.

"Is this about your mother?" Nacht asked.

Aisha twitched. Her mistress understood her far too well.

When Nacht had rescued Krista's party from the bandit cave, she had asked for information on Aisha's mother as a reward. Recently, Krista had contacted them, saying that she had found someone who knew her. They were currently on their way to visit the house of the noble in question. It seemed to Nacht like as good a use of time as any.

"I don't know..." Aisha said, her voice quivering softly. "I don't remember my mother at all. She wasn't there when I needed her...and she caused my father lots of pain too. What should I do if I ever see her again? I have no idea..." Aisha truly did not think of her as a mother, but she was too anxious to say those words.

Nacht smiled.

"Mistress?" Aisha asked.

"You're overthinking it," Nacht said. "How about, I dunno...you punch her in the face and shout, 'Where were you, you dummy?!' And after that, you can sit down and talk out all those painful emotions of yours."

"I guess I could do that," Aisha replied with a smile.

“You can do anything! You’re my servant, after all!” Nacht’s confidence seemed to get through to Aisha. Her smile grew and regained its usual brightness. “All right, then let’s press on!”

They made their way through Food Alley toward the central district where the nobility lived. Eventually, they reached the house they were looking for. It was a small building for the residence of a noble, with a bright red roof that made it stand out from the surrounding houses. It wasn’t even half the size of Elenora’s mansion, which Nacht had destroyed with lightning.

They arrived to find a beautiful young woman with blue hair waiting for them—the very picture of calm composure. “You’re right on time, Miss Nacht,” the woman said. “Aisha, best of luck to you.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Krista,” said Aisha.

“Hey, Krista. Long time no see,” said Nacht. Krista had been tremendously busy in the aftermath of the Battle of the Dragon and didn’t have much time to spend with the two of them. It had been a week since they had last met.

Krista looked as cool as ever. She wasn’t dressed as an adventurer this time, but instead wearing a long, beautifully made skirt. She looked young and beautiful. It was almost a shame to think that her soft skin spent so much time encased in a heavy metal shell. Nacht couldn’t take her eyes off of her.

“Mistress, what are you looking at?” Aisha asked, her innocent tone belying the dangerous look in her eyes.

“Nothing! Nothing at all!” Nacht said, the very picture of innocence.



“Allow me to show you in,” Krista said. “This way, please.”

They followed her into the house and made their way to one of the parlors. The building was small for a noble estate and had only a few servants. The parlor they were in seemed well furnished with high-quality items, but the other rooms were more sparsely decorated, as if there wasn’t enough to go around.

“Welcome, Miss Nacht, Miss Aisha,” a man greeted them with an elegant flourish. He wore a finely tailored outfit befitting of a noble, but beneath it, Nacht could see that his body was surprisingly well trained. “My name is Ludvin Lindburg. It is an honor to meet the heroes of our fair city.”

“Hey, no need to stand on ceremony with me!” Nacht said. “You can call me your bestie Nacht!”

They shook hands, then the woman next to Ludvin introduced herself. “I am Belinda. I’m just a commoner—no need to mind titles and such. Nice to meet you, Nacht and Aisha.” She was a young woman dressed in a witchlike getup, holding a curious golden broom. Nacht had been wondering if she was Ludvin’s wife, but it seemed that was not the case.

“N-Nice to meet you!” Aisha said, introducing herself politely despite her anxiety.

“Kya ha ha ha ha!” Belinda laughed. “Don’t be so shy, girl! This guy hardly counts as nobility anyway. He’s just a commoner who got uplifted.”

“You cut that out, Belinda!” Ludvin snapped. “I’m proper nobility now. Do you want me to have you thrown out for disrespect?”

“Hah!” Belinda shot back. “I’d like to see you try! I believe you’ll find that *my* name carries rather more weight than yours in court.”

“Gh...” Ludvin said, losing their little exchange. Watching them go at it, Nacht could tell that they were close friends despite their differences.

“Enough, you two,” said Krista. “You have guests.”

“Ah. My apologies, Madam Krista.”

“Sorry, Krista.”

With that out of the way, they moved on to the topic at hand. “First, the results of my investigation,” Krista said. “Unfortunately, I was unable to confirm the whereabouts of Aisha’s mother, the elf Floria. I apologize.” She bowed. “However, I was able to locate an acquaintance of Aisha’s parents and arrange for this meeting.”

Aisha turned her trembling eyes to look over at Belinda and Ludvin.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Aisha,” Ludvin said. “Although, if you’re *his* daughter, it feels wrong to call you ‘Miss.’ Aisha, let me introduce myself again. I was a lancer in your father Roland’s adventuring party. Somehow, I had the bad luck of being made nobility.”

Aisha gasped. “You were one of my father’s companions?” She hesitated, unsure what to say. “I suppose you must have looked after him, then?”

“Ah ha ha!” Ludvin laughed. “No, I’d say I caused nothing but trouble for that do-gooder! I was the one who needed looking after, trust me. I heard what happened from Madam Krista. It’s truly a shame to have lost him, but to see you alive and well brings joy to my heart.” He smiled with earnest kindness. Aisha awkwardly lowered her gaze, smiling shyly.

“We’ve met before, actually, but I’d be surprised if you remembered me,” said Belinda.

Aisha searched her memories for any recollection of the woman but found nothing. “Um...” she said. “When would that have been?”

“Kya ha ha! Well, there you have it. After all, last time we met, you were only *thiiiiis* big.” Belinda held out her hand, indicating a height below the seat of her chair. “I was in a party with your lunk of a father. Back then, I was an A-rank adventurer. They called me Belinda the Crimson Lotus, if you’ll believe it. I’m quite famous in the Royal Capital. No chance you’ve heard of me?”

“Oh... Um...I’m sorry,” Aisha said. “But my father told me he was just an ordinary adventurer. You were A-rank, Miss Belinda? That’s incredible!”

Belinda laughed again. “You really are his child—what a good, sweet girl! Well, these days I’m just a full-time housekeeper. Roland couldn’t cast a spell to save his life, but his sword skills were always top class. He won so many

tournaments that you had to wonder if he was cheating!”

Ludvin brought things back to the main topic at hand. “Now, Aisha. I hear you’re searching for your mother, Floria?”

Aisha looked meekly down at her feet. It looked like she was having trouble replying, so Nacht cut in for her. “Actually, I’m the one who made the request —”

“N-No!” Aisha said, quickly interrupting her. “I-I want to find her too...”

Whether he could perceive Aisha’s conflicted emotions or not, Ludvin continued speaking. “This is an old story, from back when we were working in the nearby allied kingdom of Estoll. We were hired as guards for a merchant in the Gelariau Forest, one of the biggest woodlands on the continent. We were carrying goods between the towns and villages around the region.”

“It was a pretty normal job,” Belinda added. “But on the way home, we ran into some real trouble.”

“Trouble...?” Aisha asked. The two nodded seriously.

“In the Gelariau Forest is a giant tree so big it towers over the forest itself. It’s the symbol of the woods. The people of Estoll call it the World Tree. The area around the base of the tree is the domain of the elves. We had finished our contract with the merchant and were on our way home when we suddenly heard a tremendous noise and saw the World Tree’s leaves scattering in the wind...”

“It was super loud,” Belinda continued. “It sounded like a battle. There was some kind of twisted mana seeping its way into the forest. I wanted to grab the client and scam, but your idiot father just *had* to play the hero again...” Aisha’s father had told her that he had been a mere C-rank, but to hear these two tell it, he was some kind of famous do-gooder.

“He told us to protect the client and ran off toward the screams and explosions by himself,” said Ludvin.

“The guild took a penalty out of our reward money for that,” said Belinda. “They were really angry.”

“Oh,” said Aisha. “I’m sorry...”

From the pair’s description, Aisha took after her father in both her relentless good nature and her persistent reckless streak.

“But thanks to that mess, we have Aisha here with us now! Roland showed up later, covered in wounds and carrying Floria on his back. She was on the verge of death. We used every last potion we had stockpiled to save her life.”

“What in the world happened?” Aisha asked. Her father’s friends fell silent for a moment.

It was Belinda who spoke. “Floria refused to tell. Roland said he’d found piles of dead elves, like a scene out of hell. But he saved at least one life that day thanks to his stupidity, so I suppose it was worth it.”

“The problems started later.” Ludvin held his hand to his forehead as if the thought of it was making his head ache.

“The...problems?” Aisha asked in a nervous, trembling voice. Ludvin and Belinda shared a glance and sighed.

“He started spending all his time looking after her!” Belinda said. “Just because a gorgeous elf crossed his path... We stopped taking requests and started spending all of our money on potions and medicine. And then, he married her and quit the adventuring life altogether!”

“Leaving us with no money, no home, and no job! If only he had thought for just a moment before making such grandiose promises!” added Ludvin.

“I see...” Aisha said. “I’m sorry my father did that.”

Aisha had always thought of her father as responsible and diligent, but now, she was wondering if she had been wrong. Before she could go too far down that path, though, Ludvin gave a pained smile and went on.

“Well, we made it out all right. I inherited a couple of noble titles in place of my older brothers, and Belinda was invited to work in the Royal Capital. Perhaps it was for the best.”

“Were you the one who set Aisha up in the pioneer village, then?” Nacht asked.

Ludvin nodded. “Floria was an elf and a breathtaking beauty. It seemed dangerous for her to live in the city with so many people about. If she drew the eye of the nobility, there wouldn’t be much I could do to protect her. So before she found any unwanted attention, I arranged for the two of them to live in a pioneer village as an ordinary human couple under my management. I’m afraid I owe you an apology, Aisha. Some of the hardship you have faced has been my doing.”

Aisha shook her head. “Not at all, Mister Ludvin! It sounds like you helped my father a lot. Thank you very much, in fact!”

“Hm...” Ludvin said. “Tell me, Aisha, were you happy, living in that village with your father?”

“It was very hard sometimes,” Aisha admitted, “but I was happy with my father. I can promise you that.”

“I see...” Ludvin sighed. He seemed relieved, perhaps even happy.

“Sorry to not have anything useful after that whole story,” Belinda said. “I’m afraid we don’t know where Floria ended up. I heard that she left the village two years after you were born. If I had to guess, she might have headed for her homeland, the elven village in Gelariau Forest. But that was quite some time ago...”

Belinda seemed apologetic, but Nacht was more than happy with the information they had given her.

“No need to apologize,” she said. “You’ve given us plenty. Now we know where to head next.”

“I realize that the champion of Free Market City can handle herself,” Belinda said, choosing her words carefully. “But what we encountered in the forest back then wasn’t something you see every day either. If you’re heading that way, be on your guard.”

“No need to worry! Nothing will harm Aisha as long as I’m here!” Nacht had a new destination and her spirits were riding high. But Ludvin frowned. It looked like things weren’t going to be as easy as that.

“Now might be a bad time to head for Estoll, I’m afraid...” he said.

Aisha blinked curiously. She seemed to have no idea what this was about. Nacht, however, thought she had the gist of it.

Free Market City was the center of the kingdom's commerce, and Nacht had a vantage point to observe Elenora herself, the noble who sat at the apex of it all. She had merchants going every which way, working frantically. Clearly, she was in some incredible hurry. Nacht might have written it off as the reconstruction efforts, but there were other signs as well, such as grain shortages and increases in food prices. There was only one thing it could be.

"There is going to be a war with Estoll soon," Krista said. "If you go there now, you will not be able to avoid battle."

"Are you gonna fight, Krista?" Nacht asked.

"I am," she replied, nodding her head just slightly. "The main house has been quite insistent on that matter. I will fulfill my duty as a member of the nobility." Her face was as unreadable as always, but internally her emotions were unsettled. She wasn't particularly unhappy with her duty, but she seemed to have a contempt for her family that she struggled to express. "Estoll's military is much smaller than ours. I can't imagine that the war will reach very far to the north."

"I-In that case," Aisha said, "I suppose we should wait here for the war to—" She cut herself off, noticing Nacht's gleeful smile. "Um...Mistress?"

"It'll be fine, Aisha! It's just some humans having a war. It'll take a lot more than that to stop me from going where I please."

"That isn't what worries me, though..." Aisha was deeply anxious, but Nacht seemed completely unconcerned. If anything, she was even more cheerful than normal.

They spent time listening to stories of Aisha's father's exploits and even ended up staying for dinner. After a full night, Nacht, Krista, and Aisha took their leave of the house together. Nacht's hair fluttered in the cool evening breeze as they walked past the opulent houses of the nobility.

"I suppose you're heading to Estoll in spite of my warning," Krista said. She understood Nacht's personality well and knew better than to think she would

back down. "In that case, may I ask a favor?"

"You've been a big help to us," Nacht replied. "I'd be happy to grant your requests, within reason."

Nacht meant those words. Krista had introduced them to the guild, served as a personal reference, helped them find lodging at the inn, and now, she had tracked down information on Aisha's mother. Nacht was more than happy to grant her one or two wishes.

"I have just one," Krista said. "I would like you to refrain from getting involved in the war, if it is at all possible."

"Hm," Nacht replied. "And here I thought you were going to ask me to lend you my strength."

Krista shook her head. "Perhaps that is what I am meant to say as one of the kingdom's nobles. In fact, I believe Her Highness is going to propose just such a plan when you meet her the day after tomorrow. However..."

Aisha cocked her head curiously at the words "Her Highness." Nacht suddenly realized she may have neglected to mention the meeting to her. Oh well. It was a minor detail, after all.

"However," Krista repeated, "I have at least some sense of your true power. Enough to know that if you join the war, it will hardly be a war at all."

In other words, Nacht's presence would be overstepping. Nacht understood Krista's concerns very well. It would be like bringing a nuclear bomb to a sword fight. A complete absurdity.

"I would prefer for you to stay in Free Market City," Krista said. "If you go to Estoll now, some idiots will think you mean to betray us."

"Sorry, but I'm not about to let politics or the opinion of the masses stop me from going where I want," Nacht said.

Krista nodded in understanding. "Yes, and that is why I am asking you not to get involved in this war."

"I'll take care not to, as a favor to you," Nacht said. "But honestly, I don't think you need to worry. I'm not nearly bored enough to start meddling in

mortal affairs. I'm going on a journey with Aisha to find her mother, not to get involved in some nonsensical human war."

Krista let out a sigh of relief. "I am very pleased to hear that. Miss Nacht, Aisha, I hope you visit us again in Free Market City sometime. I'll treat you to some fine liquor when the day comes."

That seemed to be Krista's way of saying goodbye. Nacht smiled. "Meeting you was a stroke of luck, Krista," she said. "I'll look forward to seeing you again."

"Y-Yes!" Aisha agreed, bowing just a little too quickly. "Thank you so much for your help, Miss Krista. Take care till we meet again!"

Krista's lips turned up very slightly at Aisha's antics. It was just a hint of a smile, like a blossom barely peeking out of its bud. It was hard to tell from her face, but to her, this was a full smile. "On the contrary, thank *you*," she said. "I wish both of you happiness."

As they parted ways with Krista, Aisha turned to ask her mistress a question. "By the way, Mistress...*who* is it you're going to meet the day after tomorrow?"

Nacht grinned and told her. Upon hearing the answer, Aisha's shrieks filled the night sky.

‡

The twin moons shone overhead as a girl walked through the forest. As she went, beasts scattered before her, and the leaves and grass lost their color. The trees bent down as if offering her passage.

She had come to the site of the Sealing Lake only to find it dried up without a trace. Her footsteps echoed on the lake bed.

"It's gone..." she said, seemingly talking to herself. "Butler, are you sure this is the right place?"

Yolno Forest was thick with monsters—hardly the place an ordinary girl would visit. Her voice sounded strange and out of place.

"Perhaps I can't grant my sister's wish after all..." she went on. "I should return home. Mother and father are waiting."

The girl's lips twisted into a strange smile. Her eyes glimmered in the darkness, filled with the light of the moons.

Chapter 2: Setting Out

Aisha's mind felt sluggish—too sluggish to tell left from right or to wonder how she had gotten here. Trying to think was like trying to grab hold of a summer heat haze. But somehow, she felt like she knew exactly where she was.

She was in a small, slightly worn-down house with only two rooms. A breeze blew in through the gaps in the wooden walls. This was the house in which she had lived with her father.

Lying in bed and unsure what to do, Aisha looked over into the other room where her father was making food. He was a formidable man with broad shoulders and a number of scars marking his toned body. Aisha couldn't wait for dinner to be ready. She kicked her little legs in anticipation as she waited, but despite her cutesy affectations, she felt a little gloomy. The truth was that she wanted to help.

Ever since Aisha had turned ten, she had wanted to be useful to her father. But if she ever so much as touched a knife, her father would be beside himself with worry. He would stop whatever he was doing and watch over her carefully to make sure she was safe. One time, she had happened to cut her finger, and her father went storming out of the house declaring that he was off to buy a potion. Aisha had tried to stop him, and in the end, it had turned into a big argument. All she had managed to do was cause trouble for her busy, hardworking father.

That was why she no longer tried to help out in the kitchen, instead merely watching while kicking her legs. The only kitchen chores she could manage were drawing water or washing the vegetables, and even then, the small, weak girl would often struggle to carry the water back from the well. Sometimes, she would spill the bucket, wasting their precious drinking water and making her worried father come running to check up on her.

Aisha was happy, but more than that, she was frustrated. She lowered her eyes. She was bad at pretty much everything. If only there were some way she

could help her father. It felt like more than she could bear. But surely her sitting here looking miserable would upset her father more than anything else! Still staring at the ground, she made up her mind to go out and speak to him.

“Ah, hello, Aisha!” He would say. *“Would you mind fetching me the pot over there? And the water bucket next to it too—the big one!”* He would tell her there were plenty of things she could do.

Aisha would just smile happily and say, *“Okay! I’ll go get them for you, papa!”*

She felt a voice reaching her in the white expanse of her consciousness. A familiar, gentle voice. It made her feel safe. “Ai...sha...”

“Mmm... Papa...?” she mumbled, still half dreaming. Her sleeping mind couldn’t make out who was speaking to her. She reached out unconsciously, grabbing at the air with her tiny hands. Suddenly, she felt her hand brush against someone’s smooth, warm skin. “Weh... M-Mistress?”

Aisha’s dim vision began to come into focus. She saw her mistress’s sweet-smelling, dark black hair, wrapped around her like the night itself. She opened her eyes further and saw her face—so lovely that she struggled to look at it directly. The golden rings around her irises were focused directly on her, and she was smiling gently.

“Good morning, Aisha,” she said.

“Good morning, Mistress,” said Aisha. Just waking up like this and saying good morning to her mistress filled Aisha’s heart with an indescribable happiness. It was unfair of her, really, to have so much of an effect on Aisha’s heart.

But Nacht’s kindness didn’t stop there. “I cooked up some silver rice in an earthenware pot,” she said. “We’re having a Japanese-style breakfast today!”

“We are? Oh, I can’t wait! But I’m sorry. I didn’t help you cook at all...” Aisha said.

“You were sleeping so soundly! I didn’t want to disturb you!”

“I’m sorry...” Aisha repeated, looking a little gloomy.

Nacht gave her a smile. “Then, would you like to help me now?”

“May I? Oh, thank you! I’ll do anything!” She couldn’t help it. Being useful to her mistress was Aisha’s greatest pleasure in life. But Nacht smiled again, seemingly telling her to wait.

“Taste it for me, then,” Nacht said, bringing a pair of chopsticks full of lustrous rice to Aisha’s mouth. “Say ‘aah.’”

“Huh?! Um, I can eat it myself...”

“Say ‘aah’!” Nacht repeated, unrelenting.

The shiny, aromatic rice made Aisha’s stomach rumble. Her face flushed red, ashamed of her faithless body. “A-Aah...” she said, opening her mouth. The clump of rice went inside it, filling her senses with an unfamiliar sweetness. As she chewed, the rice became even sweeter. It was a delicious morsel.

The second she swallowed her mouthful, Nacht brought up another bite— tofu topped with red bean paste this time. “Say ‘aah’!”

“Mmh... Aaaah...!”

“Say ‘aah’!”

“Aaaah!” In the end, there was no resisting the overwhelming assault of delicious food. Aisha did as her mistress desired.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes! It’s delicious!”

“Have another bite, then! Say ‘aah’!”

“Yes, Mistress! Aah!” She opened her mouth wider this time, like a baby bird awaiting its food. What was left of her pride was vanishing rapidly as she accepted bite after bite.

Eventually, Aisha finished all the food, letting Nacht dote on her the whole time. When she returned to her senses, she curled up into herself, clutching her head in shame. “Nineteen! Nineteen whole bites!” she sobbed. “I’m a failure as a servant...”

Nacht, however, looked completely satisfied. “I guess that does it for breakfast!” she said. “Ready to get going, Aisha?”

A spasm ran through Aisha's body. "D-Do we *have* to go?" she asked.

"We should," Nacht said. "I'd rather not drop a last-minute cancellation on the princess."

"Nhh..." Aisha whined. "Can't you go on your own, Mistress?"

"You said you wanted to go, didn't you?" Nacht asked, but the truth was that Aisha didn't remember it. She had been half asleep while studying at the time. And though she hated to disappoint her past self, now that she was awake, she found herself wishing she hadn't. "And besides," Nacht went on, "you *are* my servant. I'd like you to come with me."

"That's mean, Mistress, putting it like that!" Aisha protested. "But...okay. I really, *really* don't want to, but I'll go. And in exchange, you absolutely *must* behave yourself!" Aisha was sure that Nacht would get into some kind of mischief if she didn't promise otherwise.

"Of course!" Nacht said. "No problem!"

"You're just going to talk and go home! Nothing else!"

"Ah ha ha!" Nacht laughed. "You don't need to tell me that! I'm interested in what I can learn, you know. I don't plan on running around causing problems for everyone."

"I know..." Aisha said.

The knight pointed her sword, silver-bladed and hefty, straight at Aisha. She was wearing silver armor emblazoned with a crest of lilies, marking her as one of the princess's royal guard—elite lady knights devoted to safeguarding the women of the royal family from any and all harm. They were the strongest fighters in the kingdom.

Why was someone like that pointing her weapon at Aisha? She had felt that something like this was going to happen. Had she allowed Nacht to lull her into a false sense of security?

How did such a thing come to pass? It began a bit earlier...

“Let’s go back...” Aisha said. “I can’t do this. You should go meet her alone, Mistress...”

There were two great noble houses in Free Market City: House Lenvell and House Valoua. Their estates towered above the rest of the city. But there was one—and only one—that was built higher: the Royal Estate.

Aisha sat in a mansion’s waiting room, staring up at the crest carved into the wall—a shaft of wheat symbolizing a bountiful harvest, a sword symbolizing justice, and a crown set above them both. It was the emblem of the royal family. She had begged Nacht to leave her behind three times now. The first was at the inn, the second before entering the mansion, and now again in the waiting room itself.

“We’re already here, Aisha,” Nacht said. “It’s a little late now.” Nacht disliked being kept waiting as well, but she was glad to have time for Aisha to calm her nerves.

“But... But it’s *Her Highness*...” Aisha said. “She’s like someone out of a story! I’m sure I’ll mess everything up! I don’t want to be beheaded!” She seemed to have some strange ideas about what was going to happen. She kept glancing fearfully from left to right. Nacht thought it was rather cute. “You seem to be enjoying this, Mistress...” Aisha grumbled.

“Ah ha ha!” Nacht laughed. “I’ve done this before, you know. It’ll be fine!” Meeting princesses was always an exciting event. Back in the game, Nacht had had plenty of occasions to interact with the royalty of several of the world’s kingdoms. Nacht had accepted her share of quests from them as well. They had sent her to war, on dangerous monster exterminations, and to do any sort of busywork imaginable. Nacht couldn’t help getting excited in anticipation.

“I can’t stop worrying, though...” Aisha whimpered. Nacht couldn’t figure out what had her so concerned, though. After all, right by her side was none other than Nacht herself.

“You don’t have anything to worry about!” Nacht reassured her. “If you commit some horrible offense and they decide to behead you...” A sinister smile played on her lips. “...I will wipe this kingdom off the map.”

The pronouncement did nothing to lift Aisha’s spirits. She clutched her head

in her hands. “That just makes me *more* worried...” she said.

In reality, Aisha’s fears were groundless. Krista had told them that the kingdom’s second princess was brilliantly crafty. She was somewhat impulsive and selfish as well, but she was an open-minded woman who would appoint anyone to an official post if she believed in their talent. Krista had dealt with the princess’s bullheaded whims many times, claiming that while she was a fearsome person, she was not by any means wicked.

Krista may have meant to imply that the princess and Nacht resembled each other in their impulsive selfishness, but that was Krista’s misunderstanding. Nacht believed herself to be neither especially impulsive nor particularly selfish.

“Krista’s friend is going to be there too,” Nacht said, trying to encourage her. “She said she was a skilled knight. If she’s a friend of Krista’s, I’m sure she’ll be friendly with us. We have every reason to expect this to go well.”

Suddenly, they were out of time. There was a knock on the door, and a tall, beautiful maid in a long skirt came to fetch them. “This way, please. My liege awaits you,” she said, then led them to the chamber in the back.

“Escuush me...!” Aisha declared as she entered the room, so tense that she bit her own tongue. “No! I mean, execute me...!”

“Where are you going, Aisha?!” Nacht called out. “Calm down!”

“Wehhh...” Aisha exclaimed. “No, no, no, I mean, um...excuse me?” It had come out as a question, but the elegant lady before her smiled indulgently.

“Hee hee! Yes, ‘excuse me’ is correct,” she said. “Welcome, champion! And welcome to your servant as well.” The princess, about as tall as Nacht, was sitting on a sofa. Her face still had its youthful roundness. Her eyes seemed to shine like the full moon. Her skin was white like porcelain, and her fingers were slender and elegant. She was lovely, more like an exquisitely made doll than a living person. This was the kingdom’s greatest asset herself, Theresia von Cynthesia.

Then, Theresia’s smile changed. It was like her mask had simply fallen away, her polite affected smile becoming a fiendish grin. “Enjoy the hospitality!” she said, and without missing a beat, a shining silver blade came down upon Nacht

from behind.

Nacht, having been aware of the woman's presence but not having kept an eye on her, went over the information in her head at lightning speed. The princess was smiling. Aisha still hadn't noticed the attack. And the attacker herself, a knight disguised as a maid, was bearing down on her. Her face was screwed up in displeasure, but she wasn't hesitating to bring the blade down on Nacht's head.

Nacht ignored the maid and simply returned Theresia's smile. Her sword lacked killing intent, so Nacht decided to let it come. Then, right when the maid was beginning to wonder if Nacht would make any kind of move to stop her, she reached out and caught the blade with her bare hands—mere inches away from her head.

The woman was stunned. Nacht had caught her sword without even looking. She pulled back, trying to wrest the sword from Nacht's hand, but Nacht moved into her center of weight and simply threw her. She then stuck the point of the sword into the ground, grinning playfully.

"Hah," Nacht said. "I had a feeling you'd pull something like that. Satisfied?"

"Huh-wuh?!" Aisha exclaimed, finally processing what had happened. "Wh-What's happening?! Is the princess a bad guy?!"

Nacht petted Aisha's head. "No, no, it was just a little surprise of hers. Nothing to worry about. You just sit down and make yourself comfortable." She sat down on the sofa, facing Theresia. Aisha obediently sat down beside her.

"Pfft," the princess chortled. "Ah ha ha ha ha! Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Yes, very satisfied! That was even more splendid than I had been imagining! You are truly the hero who defeated an ancient demon—I don't imagine anyone else could have humiliated my knight like that." She turned to the knight lying on the floor. "On your feet, Yuri. This is hardly the time to be taking a nap!"

"I wish you wouldn't use me for things like this, Your Highness," Yuri, the knight disguised as a maid, said as she got to her feet. "That hurt quite a lot, you know..." Nacht had thrown her without much in the way of holding back, but she had fallen like a trained fighter, protecting herself well.

“What... What in the world is going on...?” Aisha asked in a trembling voice, the only person in the room who didn’t seem to know what was happening.

“Well, to put it simply, she attacked us,” Nacht helpfully explained.

“Huh?! Isn’t that a big deal?!”

“Now, now. That’s a bit unfair, don’t you think?” Theresia said. “It was just a little test of mine.”

“I would have to disagree, Your Highness,” said Yuri. “What I did was clearly an attack. If they had done that to *you*, I am certain you would have had them both beheaded.”

“I had no unjust intentions!” the princess protested. “It was just a bit of mischief! You’re going to make me cry if you keep making these unfair accusations!” She began to sob, making exaggerated weeping motions. She was very clearly faking it.

“Well?” Nacht asked. “Do we meet your expectations, Theresia?”

“Absolutely! You pass with flying colors! I do apologize for testing you. I’m afraid I’m the type who doesn’t believe something until I see it with my own eyes. The rumors didn’t do your strength justice! Nor, for that matter, did they adequately prepare me for how cute you are!”

“Ah ha ha! You can go ahead and call me your bestie Nacht!” Who could possibly be upset after such kind words about their appearance? Nacht’s smile brightened considerably.

“S-So...” Aisha stammered. “Wh-What does this mean, Mistress?” She didn’t have the courage to address her question directly to Theresia—a royal—so she asked her mistress instead.

“She wanted to see if Nacht, the hero of that battle we had earlier, really is as powerful as they say. So she had one of her knights attack me in order to check. But you didn’t really put your heart into that attack, did you?” Nacht said, looking over at Yuri.

“So...we were in danger again...” Aisha seemed utterly baffled.

“Don’t worry,” said Theresia. “I had a spell prepared just in case things went

wrong. Perhaps you'll let the matter slide if I offer you Yuri's head?"

"Your Highness...!" Yuri objected. "Are you trying to make me cry?!"

"I'm only kidding, you know. I considered whether I would be placing you in danger before I decided to do this little test."

Yuri gave the princess a dubious look.

"It's true!" she said. "I looked into things beforehand. They say that Champion Nacht is kind and magnanimous, regardless of how she speaks. She made certain that the captives she rescued from the bandits were properly taken care of, and some of the city's residents even say she occasionally steps in to resolve disputes between the townsfolk. She's a cheerful, upbeat girl who gladly sticks her neck out for people in trouble. She treats all people with respect no matter their station, and while she enjoys being the center of attention, she hasn't let the title of Champion go to her head. More than anything, she dotes lovingly on her servant, Aisha. If anyone so much as threatens her precious servant, she flies into a protective rage, but when it comes to herself, she is very forgiving. A certain noblewoman, who shall remain unnamed, told me that she was dangerous and that I should avoid getting involved with her no matter what, but I would give it ninety percent odds that she was joking." Theresia grinned, full of confidence.

"I suppose that sounds about right..." Aisha said. "Um, I'm glad you're okay, Miss Knight..."

"Oh? Even though Yuri went along with my little ambush?" Theresia asked.

"You know I cannot refuse your orders, Your Highness..." grumbled the knight.

Yuri Reinbelt was a tall and beautiful woman. The maid uniform she wore could not conceal her powerful musculature, and it was clear from her movements that she was an experienced fighter. She had held back in her attack against Nacht. Thinking back, she had called Theresia "my liege" before they had even entered the room. She had hardly been attempting to conceal her identity. Even before she had attacked, Nacht remembered wondering if she was a knight who was being forced to act as a maid as some kind of dare or if the princess just liked disguising her knights that way.

In the end, Yuri hadn't been seriously attempting to take Nacht's life. As far as she was concerned, that was enough reason to put it in the category of harmless prank.

Nacht glanced away from Yuri for a second, her eyes settling on a spot next to the curtain of the window behind the princess.

"Is something wrong?" Yuri asked.

"No, nothing." Nacht shook her head and turned her gaze back toward the beautiful knight.

"Yuri is one of the ten greatest knights in this kingdom," Theresia said. "If you're good enough to avoid her sword, that's a pass. If you can land a counterattack on her, that would be full points, and if you're good enough to incapacitate her, that would make you worthy of being a candidate for my hand in marriage. Well, Yuri? How did she do?" Theresia glanced over at Yuri.

Yuri looked over at Nacht with evident awe in her eyes. "As much as it shames me to say, I am afraid I am no match for this woman."

Theresia blushed red. Breathing hard with excitement, she suddenly took Nacht by the hand. "Nacht! My bestie! Would you be my bride?"

"N-No!" Aisha cut in before Nacht could respond. The girl who had been too awed to say a word to royalty a second ago looked the princess dead in the eye, glaring furiously.

"You can come too, you know." Theresia said. "You're her servant, after all."

"Weh! I-I...! But Mistress belongs to me!" She cut herself off. "No, that's not what I mean! What I mean is...she's my Mistress! Please don't!"

"Well, how about I hire you, then?!" Theresia proposed. "I can offer one thousand platinum as a starting bonus, and a yearly salary of one hundred platinum."

A single platinum coin had the purchasing power equivalent to ten million Japanese yen. In other words, the value the princess placed on Nacht was in the neighborhood of ten billion yen.

"That's pretty tempting!" Nacht said.

“Mistress?!” Aisha exclaimed in shock. But then a cunning smile crossed Nacht’s face.

“But I refuse.”

“May I ask why?” Theresia ventured. She didn’t seem particularly surprised. She must have been expecting Nacht to refuse.

“You’re avoiding placing a value on my Aisha by placing a value on me instead,” Nacht said. “But it’s not going to work. I’m not interested.”

Theresia pursed up her lips and kicked her legs like an impudent child. “No fair!” she wailed. “Why do the girls I like never want to be mine?! Oh well. I’ll just have to take my feelings out by tormenting Yuri some more.”

“At this rate, I may have to tender my resignation, Your Highness...” Yuri said, hanging her head.



Theresia paid Yuri no mind. She sighed theatrically. "If only we had you, Nacht, this war would be over in an instant. I'd be able to go wherever I wanted. It would be so good...!" It was as if Nacht were a delightful toy she had been told she wasn't allowed to play with. "Very well. I suppose we will just have to start out as friends. Call me Theresia, please! It's a pleasure to meet you, Nacht, Aisha."

"Y-Your Highness!" Yuri exclaimed. "That's—"

"Oh? What's wrong?" said Theresia. "Jealous? You don't need to worry. I'll be sure to call you to my bedchamber tonight."

"You can call me, but I won't come..." Yuri grumbled.

"I don't want my friends to call me 'Princess' or 'Your Highness,'" Theresia said. "You can call me Theresia if you'd like too, Yuri."

It seemed to be out of the question. Yuri clutched her head, shaking it rapidly. There was no way she could break conventions like that around royalty. It was simply too much.

"Lady Nacht, Miss Aisha," Yuri said, turning to address the pair. "I would ask you to please at least use Her Highness's proper title when other people might hear."

"O-Of course!" said Aisha.

"Ha ha ha... I'll try, at least," said Nacht. It was an intelligent suggestion, but whether Nacht would follow it was another question altogether.

"Well then," Theresia said, "let's move on to the main topic. Nacht, my bestie, would you mind helping out with this war of ours?" She spoke as if she was asking for a simple favor like picking up some ice cream from the convenience store. Nacht leaned in, seeming interested and prompting her to continue. "I don't think it would take much for you to bring Estoll to its knees. If you'll do it, I'll give you a thousand platinum when you return. Or are you not satisfied with that number? I can make it two thousand if you wish."

"Your Highness, I must object," Yuri said.

Theresia cocked her head, puzzled. "You object? Why? With my bestie Nacht

on the field, our army will suffer far fewer casualties. Besides, the strange way this whole thing started has me on edge. If she is there, I will be much less worried about us claiming victory. This is a girl who can vanquish ancient demons and stand up to dragons. She was even able to stop your sword without looking! She would be a preposterously useful ally. If I choose to spend our war funds recruiting her, I don't see what cause anyone has to complain, save for a few corrupt nobles."

It would also mean even greater acclaim for Nacht. And allied with her, the kingdom would be invincible. As far as Theresia was concerned, Nacht would be worth every last coin.

"Sorry to disappoint you," Nacht said, "but we already made plans just yesterday. Besides, I have no interest in human wars. Sounds like a real bummer."

Theresia pursed up her lips again, clearly upset to have been shot down so directly. "All right, all right," she said. "Then might I ask you to stay in our kingdom until the end of the war? Come to the castle with me and I'll treat you with the finest tea and sweets in all the land."

"I told you, we already have plans. But thanks for the invitation. I'll make sure to pay a visit one of these days. You'll just have to wait until then."

"Bleh! You're so mean sometimes, Nacht! I'll have you recall that I'm the princess. Would it kill you to listen to at least *one* of my requests?" Theresia screwed her lovely face up into a pout, crossing her arms in displeasure and puffing out her cheeks until they looked like round fruits. She looked kind of cute like that, Nacht thought.

"Mistress?" Aisha chided Nacht, interrupting her train of thought. She hadn't meant to stare. Aisha's senses were getting more and more acute, as evidenced by her awareness of where Nacht was looking. Nacht had started to wonder if it was some kind of supernatural ability.

"Are you suuuuure there's no way I can change your mind?" Theresia said, whining like a spoiled child. "I'll let you take Yuri's place in my bed tonight if you'd like."

Aisha hissed like an angry cat.

“Hah,” Nacht said. “If you’re so insistent, how about we settle this with a game?”

Back when Nacht was with her guild, they would often settle disagreements with contests, the winner’s desires taking precedence. If many people had an opinion on a matter, they would settle it with a vote, but if it was just two or four of them, they might do a mock battle or a quiz, or even battles of wits or board games. Quarrels between guildmates were also settled through duels.

Nacht didn’t want the connection she’d made with this princess from a fantasy world to amount to nothing. If they were going to part ways, she wanted it to be in a way both parties could agree to. Moreover, this was a perfect chance to give her hardworking Aisha some combat experience. She didn’t want it to slip through her fingers.

“Fight my Aisha,” Nacht said. “If you win, I’ll accept your invitation to tea.”

“M-Mistress?!” Aisha sprung to her feet, looking every which way in a panic. “What—”

“Really?” Theresia asked, bounding up eagerly. “Really *really*? Yuri, make sure you win, even if it kills you!”

“Your Highness...” Yuri said.

The two servants, both bound to the whims of their impulsive masters, hung their heads side by side.

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“I’m really sorry...” Aisha said. “My Mistress can be a bit...”

“No, no, it’s quite all right,” Yuri reassured her. “I’m the one who owes you an apology. Her Highness can be very stubborn sometimes.”

The two bowed their heads to each other.

“Don’t let your guard down, Yuri,” Theresia said. “We wouldn’t want to see you humiliate yourself like last time!”

“Ah ha ha!” Nacht laughed. “Fight with everything you’ve got. My Aisha will wipe the floor with you.”

“Oh?” asked Theresia. “But your servant doesn’t seem so confident, does she?”

“She’s just worked up,” Nacht replied. “Besides, Aisha isn’t like me. She’s a humble, modest girl. But I suppose that’s part of what makes her so charming.”

The mistresses were already taunting each other, seemingly ignoring their servants altogether. Theresia never gave up on something once she had made up her mind, and Yuri knew better than to object. Aisha, however, kept glancing plaintively at Nacht, hoping that she might change her mind. She found no such salvation.

“I’ll intervene if your lives are in danger,” Nacht said with a grin to toss some fuel on the fire. “Both of you, fight with everything you’ve got.”

Aisha sighed and slumped her shoulders. Yuri, an experienced knight, looked down apologetically at the much smaller girl. “I hardly ever lose in a duel, you know,” she said. “I’m prepared to go all out...but, well, will you be all right in that outfit?” Yuri had changed out of the maid outfit she had been using as a disguise and gladly donned her knight armor, forged of enchanted steel and holy silver. Aisha, on the other hand, was still wearing her frilly maid outfit and knee-length skirt. She didn’t look at all prepared for battle.

“Um, yes!” Aisha said. “It’s tougher than it looks; don’t worry.”

Yuri gave her a dubious look. Aisha’s skirt was fluttering around her legs, revealing inches of bare skin. Her outfit didn’t look tough in the slightest.

Nacht had set only one condition for the duel: the fighters would start the duel twenty-five meters apart. That was it. They were quite favorable terms for Yuri. In a battle between a knight and a mage, at that distance, the knight would win ninety percent of the time. Moreover, knights excelled in one-on-one fights while mages really shone when they could bring their destructive power to bear in battles between armies. A mage without a retinue of guards was like a knight without armor. They would need at least twice the starting distance to stand a chance against Yuri.

Yuri quietly took the measure of Champion Nacht’s servant. Her body was trembling with nervousness. That only stood to reason. Any ordinary human would be afraid to face off against a knight in armor. She must have felt the

same way Yuri had when she'd just begun her training, the first time she had faced a knight.

She was swaying back and forth, holding her beat-up wooden staff in front of her like a sword. Some mages studied the art of staff fighting to increase their options for close-range combat, but that did not seem to be the case with Aisha.

"All right," Nacht said. "You two ready? The fight starts when this coin hits the ground."

They were a mere twenty-five meters apart. Yuri's physical abilities had been honed to their absolute peak; she could close that distance in under two seconds. Even the mages at the palace would only be able to fire off a single spell in that time. Still, her opponent was the servant of Miss Nacht—the woman who had fended off her surprise attack without turning to look at her sword and thrown her like a rag doll. If she assumed Aisha was only as strong as a palace mage, she might end up getting taken off guard.

And who knows what Her Highness will do to me if I shame myself like that again... Yuri thought. She took in a deep breath and let it out, quieting her mind and focusing only on the battle at hand.

"And go!" Nacht declared, flipping the coin in her hand into the air. Yuri watched with focused senses as the coin fell slowly to the ground. She let the mana flow through her body. And the instant she heard the sound of metal striking the floor, she charged directly at her opponent.

She moved with explosive speed, leaving a distinct imprint of her foot in the ground. But she had only closed half of the distance to Aisha when she heard a sound—a mysterious rush of wind. "Gh!" Yuri brought up her shield. "Is this spirit magic?"

Yuri was not bereft of information about her opponent. She knew that during the Battle of the Dragon, this small girl had invoked the magic of the spirits to devastate an army of monsters. She was on guard enough to stop herself, but Aisha's magic appeared much faster than the magic she was familiar with, and with very little warning.

"Incredible..." Yuri muttered.

The sky around her was full of countless small spirits, all of them giggling playfully. A sword of wind was coming her way, made of dozens of the little things. It seemed hopeless, but Yuri kept a level head. The impact of the sword against her shield wasn't as heavy as she had feared. It was sharp enough to rend flesh, but fared poorly against steel.

"Thou shalt be as an invincible fortress..." Yuri said, performing an incantation. "*Magic Sword Art: Wall of Steel!*" Mana coursed through her whole body, strengthening her armor and shield. She ran forward, ignoring the sword and focusing her magic on protecting her body's vulnerable parts from lethal attacks, until she burst through, closing the remaining distance. The longer she let this fight go on, the worse her prospects for victory would be.

Yuri couldn't see it—it was all but invisible—but she heard the sound. Three more wind swords were coming. She dodged the first by stepping to the side. The second struck her armor and glanced off. The third she blocked with her shield. But that attack struck with much more force than any of the previous ones. "Nh—!" she cried as her shield flew out of her hand.

Still, Yuri had closed the distance. The girl was right in front of her, looking up with fearful eyes. Yuri was prepared to sheathe her sword if Aisha surrendered, but Aisha was defiant. Despite her fear, her eyes were shining with resolve.

Yuri hesitated, but only for a second. Then, she swung her sword in a wide arc. Aisha tried desperately to jump out of the way, but her movements were far too slow. Her sword would cut through the girl's flesh, all the way to the bone. She had certainly put enough power behind the strike. But...

Clang! Her sword struck Aisha and glanced off with a loud sound. "What...?"

It was impossible. She had swung her sword with enough force to cleave flesh, but it was stopped by a single layer of cloth. It was as if she had tried to cut through a chunk of solid lead. She had been planning on stopping at the bone, but her sword apparently didn't have enough force behind it to overcome Aisha's mysterious resilience.

Aisha, for her part, was knocked back by the force of Yuri's blow. But instead of landing, she came to a stop in midair, looking down at her opponent from above.

Aisha was scared. Of course she was. She couldn't help how she felt. But being scared was no reason to run away.

After the battle against the dragon, Nacht had apologized to Aisha over and over again. *"I was arrogant. I didn't consider the possibility. You were in danger because of me. I'm so sorry."* It made Aisha sad. It made her think that Nacht still saw her as a child in need of protection—that she *was* a child in need of protection. But it was Aisha who had decided to stand by Nacht's side. Her and no one else. She was prepared to face danger and misfortune even if it was really, really, *really* scary. After all, it was her own weakness that had made Nacht apologize to her.

Aisha wanted to become stronger. She wanted to be capable of everything, from fighting to studying to housework, so that one day, she could hold her head high and stand proudly beside her mistress. So no matter how scared she was, she wasn't going to run away.

She watched as Yuri's silver blade came for her. Knowing that she had no way to avoid it, she steeled herself for the blow. "Ngh—!" she cried as her body was knocked aside by the force of the blow. She felt her bones cry out as pain ran through her body, but that was it. The armor Nacht had given her could withstand a dragon's claws. It protected her well.

Borrowing the power of the wind spirits, Aisha brought her body to a stop in midair. Yuri, Theresia's knight, had been even stronger than Aisha had expected. In the blink of an eye, she had closed a distance that would have taken Aisha five or six seconds to run, then flawlessly defended herself from the blades of wind.

Nacht had taught Aisha how to deal with melee fighters as a mage. First, block their movement. Second, distract them with a barrage of weak attacks. Then, finally, mix in some strong attacks to finish them off. Aisha had tried her best, but all she had managed to do was rob her opponent of her shield.

"Sorry!" Aisha had done the best she could with her feet on solid ground. Muttering an apology to her opponent, she flew higher into the air.

Nacht's teachings echoed in her mind. *"Remember, Aisha. You're a mage."*

Fighting dirty is par for the course. You gotta use your head. Make preparations in advance. Go for your opponent's weak points. Trick them if you can."

The sky was full of wind spirits, playing merrily. Aisha had prepared the field well. Now, she just had to fly out of reach of her opponent's sword so she could attack without fear of counters.

The spirits giggled as they lashed out at Yuri with their swords. They made plenty of dents in her armor, but Yuri herself seemed unharmed. Calm in the heat of battle, she launched a counterattack.

"Magic Sword Art: Wing Cutter!" With a high-pitched sound of rushing wind, as loud as a scream, Yuri's slash lashed out ahead of the sword itself, cutting aside the blades of wind. Somehow, Yuri was able to launch ranged attacks using a sword.

Before Aisha could react, Yuri followed up with another attack. She jumped off the ground toward where Aisha was floating. She was in range of a melee strike. *"Magic Sword Art: Heaven's Leap!"*

"No!" Aisha cried out. The wind spirits formed a whirlwind around her as a protective wall, but the force of Yuri's blow cut through her defenses easily. She was going all out on this attack. Aisha may have been protected by her equipment, but Yuri's strike was strong enough to shatter bones. "Gwaaah!" Aisha was knocked back, in too much pain to make a counter of her own. But the wind spirits were unaffected. They lashed out, unleashing a fierce assault to protect their summoner.

"N-Ngh!" Yuri had put everything she had into that attack. This time, the blades of wind caught her on her back foot. But this was nothing more than a distraction. The real threat was the unavoidable storm brewing right beneath her.

Yuri's feet were in the air when the downburst struck. It threw her hard to the ground, knocking the air out of her lungs. "Gah!" Yuri struggled to her feet in time to avoid a follow-up attack. Unlike Aisha, she knew how to ignore her pain and fight on. *"Magic Sword Art..."* she began.

Yuri was a professional fighter. She had faith in her sword arm if nothing else. Even though one of her arms was dangling limply by her side and blood was

running down her face from a cut on her forehead, she prepared to take a second leap at Aisha.

Aisha doubted that she could have continued to fight if she were in the same condition. She was both awed and intimidated by Yuri's conviction, but she didn't allow herself to hesitate. *I'm a mage...* she thought. *Fighting dirty is par for the course.* Aisha was Nacht's servant. If her mistress expected something of her, she was going to do her best not to disappoint her. And Nacht had said herself that Aisha would win this battle. She would simply have to do it, no matter how difficult it seemed.

"Heaven's...Leap—?!" Yuri continued. But she never performed the technique. The ground underneath her fell away, creating a deep hole. The earth around her was full of laughing spirits.

Aisha had only visibly used wind spirits in the fight to prevent Yuri from noticing the delicate work her earth spirits were doing underground. It was all a trick. Aisha was still young and frail. She was a mage, not a warrior, and the pain in her arm was so bad that part of her wanted to surrender on the spot. In an ordinary fight, she would have had no chance. And so, she had resorted to a dirty trick in order to come out ahead.

"Spirits of wind," Aisha began, "please, grant me the strength to defeat her!" The spirits glowed with Aisha's mana and began to converge. A whirlwind sprang up, becoming an enormous blade of wind that glowed with a pale green light. It towered into the sky like a mountain with its peak high out of sight. This was all of Aisha's power—the best she could do after all of her training pursuing her mistress's unreachable level.

Yuri rushed to defend herself. "Thou shalt be as an invincible fortress... *Wall of Steel!*" Light struck light, and a huge plume of dust rose from the ground. The ground itself was being torn apart with a horrifying sound. Yuri could see and hear nothing. And then, the dust was blown away, pushed aside by the force of Yuri's defense. The sky cleared. There was silence.

Yuri was still standing even after that attack, using her sword to support the weight of her body. "No way..." Aisha stared in disbelief. "Then...again!" She began to focus her mana once more.

“That’s enough!” Nacht stepped in, stopping the fight.

“Weh...?” Aisha sounded exhausted. Nacht smiled.

“You fought well,” Nacht said. “You won, Aisha. Hold your head high.”

As Nacht spoke, Yuri collapsed to the ground.

Aisha had far more mana than an ordinary person from this world. Not even Yuri could withstand the power of her summoned spirits when she went all out on a single attack. Aisha, though, found herself admiring the force of will that enabled Yuri to stay on her feet despite her wounds, all so as to not shame herself as a fighter.

A wave of relief washed over Aisha, and with it, she felt her strength leave her body. Her first one-on-one duel had been more taxing on her body than she had anticipated. But just when she thought she was about to collapse, she found herself in Nacht’s arms. Aisha didn’t have the energy to object. She simply allowed her mistress to pick her up and dote on her all she pleased.

It may have been a friendly duel cooked up on the spur of the moment, but to Aisha, it was her first time grasping victory with her own power. To be fair, most of it had been thanks to the help of the spirits, but Aisha was so elated at having been declared the winner that she allowed herself to forget her dignity. “I-I did my best,” she said. “Mistress, I want a reward.”

‡

“So you lost, Yuri.” Theresia pursed her lips in frustration as she watched Nacht go.

“To my eternal shame,” said Yuri. She was overly serious even as far as knights went. There was no doubt that she meant those words. She could have won if she had believed Nacht when she’d said she would stop the fight before anyone’s life was in danger. If only she hadn’t held back on that first attack...

“Oh well,” Theresia said. “I suppose I’ll just have to look forward to your punishment, then. Are your wounds healed?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Yuri said despondently. “The potion Miss Nacht gave me was incredible. It had the same restorative power as the high-grade potions

reserved for the royal family.” It should have taken three entire months for Yuri’s wounds to heal, but they were already gone without a trace. It was very rare to find a potion with such a powerful effect. Theresia was not without her own means, but there was something else bothering her.

“Am I imagining it, or is she simply giving those things away...?”

“No, Your Highness. It seems that way to me as well.”

“Goodness...” the princess sighed. “Ah, if only I could have gotten my hands on that girl...”

The extent of Nacht’s power was unknown, but it seemed to be even greater than the rumors had suggested. And based on the number of expensive potions she had been giving away as if they were candy, she had plenty of resources as well. Moreover, Theresia had found herself charmed by Nacht’s personality.

“Still,” Theresia continued, “I suppose things went well enough.” She had succeeded in establishing a friendly connection. She may not have won Nacht’s support as an ally of the kingdom, but she was sure she had at least lessened the possibility of Nacht siding with their enemies. But that silver lining didn’t change how frustrating it was. “I really would have married her, you know...” she said, a teasing tone in her voice.

“I wish you wouldn’t say such things, Your Highness...” Yuri protested, but she knew it was pointless. Theresia, for all her talent, was always fixated on those with abilities greater than her own, be it her father’s talent at mediation, her older brother’s or Yuri’s skill with arms, or her older sister’s beauty. Nacht in particular had exceeded her imagination, and in more than just martial prowess —when Yuri lost the duel, Theresia had challenged Nacht to a game of strategy only to be soundly defeated. Theresia hadn’t lost a game since she had challenged the emperor to a round.

Additionally, Theresia had already given up her right to succeed to the throne. She had no reason to concern herself with succession politics. Her father had been haranguing her for years to find a spouse. It didn’t seem impossible to think that he might approve an arrangement with Nacht.

“Isn’t that right?” Theresia concluded, having finished explaining all that and more to her beleaguered knight.

“Perhaps.” The air shimmered behind her. “But I have to wonder if His Majesty would approve of a marriage between two women...” A girl appeared behind Theresia. She was short and cute and wearing a black maid’s outfit.

“So you were watching, Cia,” said Yuri. Even she was unable to notice the princess’s shadow when she didn’t want to be seen.

Cia sneered mockingly. “Of course!”

“Good,” said Theresia, cutting Cia off before she could make a comment about Yuri’s humiliating loss. They could snap at each other after she had asked her question. “Come out, then, and tell us: do you think she noticed you?”

Cia had accompanied the princess from the shadows as her bodyguard all day. When she had hidden herself, even Yuri, with all her skill, couldn’t notice her.

Theresia had formed the Knights of the White Lily to fight her public battles. The Sable Attendants were her blades in the dark. They specialized in information—part of Cia’s job had been to gather intelligence on Nacht.

“Yes,” she said. “Without a doubt.”

“I really can’t believe I let her get away...” The princess looked even more disappointed than she had before.

“She spotted me around the time a certain knight lost her duel.”

“If you wanna fight, bring it.”

Cia ignored Yuri and continued. “She’s dangerous...” she said, a sudden note of anxiety in her voice. “I can’t even tell how powerful she is. If she tries to hurt you, Your Highness, I don’t know if I could keep you safe...”

Theresia smiled and stroked Cia’s hair. “If you can’t beat someone, just make them an ally instead. You know, perhaps we should do some investigations of our own—into the matter of Aisha’s mother.”

“If you order me, I can start immediately.”

But who is she...? Theresia wondered as she continued stroking Cia’s hair. *My bestie Nacht...* She detached herself from the world around her, plunging into the sea of thought. Before the Battle of the Dragon, Theresia had never heard so much as a whisper about the girl. And between her beauty and her

personality, there was no doubt that she would stand out anywhere she went. It was as if she had appeared out of nowhere. A woman of mystery, with no past to speak of. *And a demiwyrm... Perhaps a visitor from the hidden world of dragons? What if the fire dragon was trying to take her back to their home world? It makes a kind of sense, I suppose, but the whole thing is preposterous...*

In the end, there was only one thing Theresia knew for certain: she still could not say who Nacht was or where she had come from. “Not that it matters,” she said, smiling like a playful child. “Whoever you are, we will have tea together one day, and you will teach me what you know.”

‡

The next morning, Nacht and Aisha left Free Market City. They were seen off by a great crowd of everyone from adventurers to elderly merchants. It seemed that Nacht had developed a bit of a fan club in the short time she had been here.

“We’ll miss you! Stay well and travel safe!”

“Nooooo! Lady Nacht! Don’t gooooo!”

“You come back sometime, you hear?”

And they were off.

“It’s a lovely day today, isn’t it, Mistress.”

“Yeah! Perfect day to set out on a trip!”

They made their way under the clear blue sky, the sun shining down on them. Aisha was sweating from the light exertion. “Um...” she said after they had been walking cheerfully for two hours. “Mistress, how far is it going to be to Estoll?”

“At the pace we’re going,” Nacht answered, “about a month.” Estoll was the neighboring country. It only stood to reason that it would take a considerable amount of time to get there on foot.

“Weh?! Th-That’s way too long! Shouldn’t we go back to the city and find a carriage or something?” The normal route to take when traveling from Free Market City to Estoll was to take a public carriage to Margrave Reinholt’s domain, and from there pass through the Great Tunnel of Leegh.

“Don’t be silly, we have nothing to worry about! My plan is to reach Estoll by tomorrow.”

“Um, Mistress... I can’t run as fast as you, you know...”

“Ah ha ha!” Nacht grinned. “You think I’m gonna *run* there?”

Aisha looked dubious. “Th-Then how are we...”

“Well, we’ve walked a good ways,” said Nacht. “Wanna take a break, Aisha?”

“I...um...well...yes. A short one.”

“All right! Then come here.” Nacht reached out to take Aisha by the hand. Aisha, who hadn’t quite relaxed her guard, flinched back. But Nacht was faster. In a heartbeat, she pulled Aisha into her arms. She cradled her gently, their faces almost touching. Aisha flushed with embarrassment as she clung to her mistress.

“Weh... Um... All that walking made me sweaty, you know...” Aisha protested. “You might not want to—”

“The wind’ll have you dry in no time!” said Nacht. “All right, Aisha...ready to fly?”

“Huh? Did you say... Are you... Mistress, wait for— Eep!” Carrying Aisha bridal-style in her arms, Nacht leaped into the sky. “Aaaaacpth! M-Mistress! We’re too high up! You’re going too fast! Slow down!” Aisha held on for dear life. But Nacht was the kind of being who was only spurred on when told to wait.

“You’re safe! Just think of it as a roller coaster! It’s fun!”

“Wait! What was that spin for?! Y-You’re going to get me killed! My heart is going to fly out of my chest and then I’ll die!”

Holding Aisha’s soft body close, Nacht slowed down to a leisurely pace. She’d had enough fun at the girl’s expense.

Aisha’s shoulders heaved with frantic breaths as she glared up at Nacht. But she was so cute when she was frightened like this that Nacht just couldn’t help herself. Oh well.

“Th-That was really scary...” Aisha said.

“Sorry,” said Nacht. “Just having a bit of fun.”

“If that’s your idea of fun, you’re going to get me killed one of these days...” Aisha muttered. She clung weakly to Nacht, pressing her face into her bosom so as to not accidentally catch a glimpse of the ground beneath her.

“Didn’t you fly in your fight earlier?” Nacht asked. “What’s got you so scared?”

“That was *much* slower...” Aisha said. “And I was pretty high up, but not *this* high. And I was flying with the power of the spirits. Like this, I just can’t stop thinking about what would happen if you dropped me...” She gulped and tightened her grip.

Nacht certainly didn’t mind the girl clinging to her, but she already had her shoulders and legs well supported. “Don’t worry about that,” she said. “I won’t let you out of my grasp, come arrows, come wind, come lightning, or come dragons!” That made Aisha smile a bit. She looked up at Nacht. “It’s pretty up here, y’know,” Nacht encouraged her. “You should have a look around!”

Slowly, Aisha turned her gaze away from her mistress’s face. “Wah!” she exclaimed. “It’s beautiful, Mistress! The sky, the sea...it’s all so pretty!”

The blue sky stretched in every direction, curving gently at the horizon. The clouds drifted around them like floating islands. Beams of light filtered through the gaps in the clouds like great pillars, illuminating the land beneath them. To the left, she saw the brilliant green of the Yolno Forest. To the right, she saw a great river. And off in the distance, she could just make out the sea. Straight ahead, they were coming up on a mountain range, high enough for its peaks to poke through the cloud tops.

“Yeah,” said Nacht. “It’s a fantasy world, all right.”

Aisha’s eyes shone. Seeing the world from the sky was a whole new perspective for her. For a while, she just enjoyed the experience. But then, suddenly, she remembered where she was. She looked down, and a shiver of dread ran through her body.

“We *could* press on to Estoll...” Nacht said. “But how do you feel about

making a little side trip first, Aisha?”

“I don’t mind at all!” Aisha said a little too quickly. “In fact, I love being on solid ground! Can we please?”

“All right, then,” said Nacht. “Hang on tight!”

“Eeeek! P-Please don’t speed up like thaaaa—!!!”

Nacht was grinning when she touched down on the ground, but Aisha looked like she was going to be sick. “Mistress!” she said. “I hate you!”

“I’m sorry, Aisha. I promise I’ll fly nice and easy tomorrow. No more teasing.”

“Hmph!” It didn’t seem like Aisha had been much a fan of Nacht’s wild ride through the sky.

As Aisha sulked, Nacht produced a succulent bunch of jewel grapes from her storage. She plucked one off and offered it to Aisha. Aisha tried to look away, but kept stealing glimpses of the treat like a wild cat. And then, when she could bear it no longer, she greedily ate it up.

“Mmh! This is so good!” she said, speaking between bites. “I-I mean, listen! *Mrmf...* C-Can I have another? *Nom...* I mean... *Gulp...* You can’t buy me with food!”

“I know,” said Nacht. “The grapes are just an apology.”

Aisha smiled cheerfully as she devoured the grapes. It seemed like they had cheered her up. “So, where are we going now, Mistress?” she asked. They had flown here through the sky, after all. She had no idea where in the world they were. But all would be revealed in time...

“You should be able to figure it out in a second!” said Nacht. “Look, we can see it already.”

Just then, a small settlement came into view. Aisha stopped dead in her tracks. “Mistress...is this...?”

“Yup! It’s your hometown.”

The pioneer village Flora. A small village of fewer than a hundred people built in the land between Yolno Forest and Cetonia Field. It was good land, blessed

with bounty from both the river and forest. It was here that Aisha had lived with her father.

Aisha trembled with shock. She took hold of Nacht's clothing and clung tight. "Why here...?" she asked.

"I just thought it would be a good idea to pay our respects to your dad before we set out. Besides, do you need a reason to visit your own house?"

"But..." Aisha said. "But I was driven out..."

"I know. It sounds like you had some disagreements."

"They told me to never return..."

"Ah ha ha!" Nacht laughed. "As if! If they want to take my Aisha's home away, I'll just take it back by force."

In fact, Nacht had made preparations for their return to Aisha's father's home. She had demanded Elenora hand over the village to her as a condition for agreeing to meet the princess. Elenora was still in charge of managing the village's affairs, but Nacht was now its rightful lord. And as a prize for beating the princess in a game, Nacht had won a guarantee—in the name of the royal family, no less—that as long as she, Aisha, and Aisha's mother Floria lived, her right of domain over Flora would be upheld.

As for Theresia, she was simply happy to have made a formal connection between Nacht and the kingdom. She was perfectly satisfied to hand the village over as a prize in a game.

The villagers regarded Nacht and Aisha with furtive stares. Things had been better for them since Nacht had taken over on paper. Their taxes were reduced, and they had been given priority in entering Free Market City. Nacht had sent people to look after the area and soldiers to patrol for bandits. And there was no shortage of great lords and ladies who were eager to grant them favors out of deference to Nacht. They had little cause for resentment over the change in management.

Nacht had done all this merely so that when Aisha returned to her childhood home, she could enter through the front gate.

Nacht took a step, causing Aisha, who had been clinging to her dress, to pull on her outfit.

“M-May I hold your hand?” Aisha asked.

“Of course you may!” Nacht took Aisha’s small, trembling hand in her own.

Deep in her heart, Aisha was terrified—too terrified to take a single step. Her grief over the loss of her father and the fear she had felt when she was robbed of her home kept her feet rooted to the ground.

Slowly, the two continued onward. Sometimes, Aisha would sense a villager’s gaze from a field nearby and begin to tremble again, but she pressed on with all her might. At last, they came within sight of the small, slightly worn-down house. Aisha hurried along, dragging Nacht behind her.

“Awa...” she muttered, unable to form proper words. Then, slowly, she opened the door. Emotion flooded her heart and tears came to her eyes. “I’m home...”

Aisha stood there for a few minutes, lost in thought, before suddenly returning to herself. “Oh! I’m sorry, Mistress! Please, come in!”

It was quite unusual for Aisha to be the one inviting Nacht anywhere. Nacht smiled. “Thanks for having me over, Aisha,” she said.

“Eh heh...” Aisha giggled. “It feels weird hearing you say that.”

“It’s not bad, having you invite me in,” Nacht said. “Although I suppose this is my servant’s house, isn’t it? Strange...” It was her first time being invited to a girl’s house, and she felt a bit like she was coming here to ask Aisha’s father for his daughter’s hand in marriage. She could almost imagine living as a family together under this roof.

“I know it’s a little run-down...” Aisha said. “But I guess it’s pretty clean, at least. I’m a bit surprised...” The villagers must have been keeping the house ready to reuse at any time. Both the garden out back and Aisha’s father’s grave were neat and tidy.

They stepped into the garden together. For a moment, Nacht closed her eyes

and stood silently in front of the grave. Then, she opened her eyes wide. “Nice to meet you, Aisha’s dad! I know this is sudden, but can I have your daughter?”

“Wha—?! Mistress?!”

“Oh, excuse me...” Nacht went on. “I guess I already went and took her. It’s a bit too late for you to tell me not to.”

“That’s even worse!” Aisha exclaimed, but she was smiling happily despite her protests. She knelt down and clasped her hands in prayer. “I’m home, father,” she said. “I’ve had a lot of hard times since I left, but I’m very happy now. I owe everything to Mistress. Oh! This is Mistress Nacht. I suppose you could say I’m her servant. She’s a ridiculous person, but she’s so, so amazing. She saved my life when we first met...”

Aisha spoke on and on, her thoughts and emotions spilling out as she did. Not wanting to interrupt, Nacht stepped back to take a look at Aisha’s house. Aisha thought the people of the village hadn’t come to her father’s aid while he was ill because they hated her, but Nacht suspected that the truth was something different.

Mana Fever, an infectious disease, had spread to the village. More than twenty of the villagers had caught it, and half of them had died, including Aisha’s father. As a former adventurer and hard worker, he had been important to the village. With him bedridden, the others feared for their survival. They didn’t have anything to spare for other families. And they chose Aisha as a scapegoat.

“And then, we were suddenly meeting with Her Highness The Princess!” Aisha went on, still speaking to her departed father. “I was so tense the whole time! It was awful! Mistress really can be unreasonable sometimes...”

It was easy to tell from how clean they had kept his grave that Roland had no few admirers among the village folk. There must have been some of them who’d tried to stick up for Aisha. But the people had decided that Aisha was the reason for the disease—once they were rid of her and her curse, the disease would vanish as well. However, while Mana Fever was highly infectious, a human with an average amount of mana would eventually recover without their life being in much danger. By now, there was no sign of disease left in the

village.

Aisha had been forced out of the village by weak, powerless people who had chosen to torment her in order to feel some semblance of control. Nacht didn't think the villagers felt any real enmity or malice, though. They were simply afraid and had made up their minds that it was Aisha's fault, forcing her to play the scapegoat.

Nacht would have gladly eradicated the whole village of fools for daring to sacrifice Aisha, but Aisha herself did not wish to punish the villagers. That was why she had chosen the path of reconciliation.

"I'm glad I could talk to my father again like this..." Aisha said. "That's another thing that you've given me, Mistress." She turned to face Nacht and smiled.

Nacht laughed. "Personally, I feel lucky to have met *you*. So I suppose I'm indebted to your father as well."

"I wish you could have met him..." Aisha said. "He would have smiled and told me he was glad I was living such a happy life. If only I had been able to save him..."

"It's sad," Nacht agreed. "Although 'sad' hardly seems to cover it. Humans can be such weak creatures. When something they don't like happens, they jump to blame someone else. They gang up on people. They convince themselves they're in the right. So that's why, Aisha, even if you can't hear it from anyone else, at least you can hear it from me..." Nacht fixed her gaze on Aisha. "You didn't do anything wrong."

A shiver ran through Aisha's body. She shook her head to stop herself from crying. "I don't...believe that..." she said.

"Even if you did some small things wrong here and there, it was the disease that was at fault. Can we agree on that?"

Aisha said nothing, choking back her tears.

"You can come here to visit your father whenever you want," Nacht said. "And you can hold your head high when you do. That's a promise from your bestie."

“O-Okay! Yes, Mistress!”

That night, they ate dinner in Aisha’s old house. It was a modest meal—wheat porridge, pickles, and dried fruit.

“Hee hee...” Aisha laughed. “You’re better at cooking than my father, Mistress.”

“Well, don’t blame me if he haunts you for saying that!”

They kept on chatting, joking around, and laughing late into the night. Aisha was usually an early sleeper, but she stayed up regardless and, predictably, ended up oversleeping. It was almost noon when she awoke, much to her shock. If they wanted to get to Estoll on schedule, they would have to travel by high-speed Nacht.

Aisha pulled her clothes on over her head as she ran outside, her feet pattering along. “I’m ready!” she said. “Let’s go!”

Chapter 3: Meetings and Partings

“General Grascas ven Antarch, I give you a force twenty thousand strong. Make war against the kingdom of Sindoria and cast them down.” In an audience chamber decorated with a crest bearing a lion motif—the mark of Estoll—Grascas bowed his head as the king gave his orders. The king’s voice sounded dispirited and lifeless, as if he were discussing tedious bureaucratic niceties. “We will no longer tolerate their barbaric practice of forcing other countries into unjust trade agreements. We have made a declaration of war. Show them no mercy. Cut down all who would stand against you.”

Belseirre, the king of Estoll, was an utterly mediocre king. He was said to be wholly incompetent at war, but he was competent enough during times of peace, and he didn’t seem to harbor any territorial ambitions. Though not too prideful to listen to his subordinates’ advice, much of the advice given to him was poor. He wasn’t a particularly kingly king. He was easily swayed by temporary circumstances and needed a great deal of help, but if nothing else, he had avoided earning the ire of the populace. He was a kind man at heart who always thought of his people first when considering how he should govern his kingdom. He wasn’t very good at securing victory in struggles for power, but he had helped consolidate the country of Estoll and increase its self-sufficiency, reducing its reliance on imports for basic foodstuff. Grascas knew him to be a king worthy of his service.

But why?! Grascas thought. Why must we go to war with Sindoria?! But it was not a vassal’s place to interrupt his king. The invasion of Sindoria had already been decided. Voicing his objections now would do nothing but lower morale.

Grascas kept his head bowed, his fingernails grating against the beautifully polished floor in suppressed anger. He bit down hard to prevent himself from blurting out the words he wanted to say. The inside of his mouth tasted like metal.

“This matter has been settled, General Grascas,” said the king. “Now, I must

be off. My wife awaits me.”

Crack! A sharp sound rang out as cracks formed in the tile underneath Grascas’s fingers. His anger felt almost palpable throughout the audience chamber. The nobles scrambled out of their seats and made to leave the chamber. When Grascas was alone, he spat something out of his mouth—a bloody fragment of tooth.

Someone came up to him and spoke. “I am sorry, General. I wasn’t able to stop this...” It was the successor to the throne himself, the crown prince of Estoll.

“No, Prince William. Do not blame yourself.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. This is all because of my own weakness. I am powerless. Powerless to bring prosperity to my kingdom, powerless to take the throne, and powerless to defeat our enemies...”

Few had noticed how mad the kingdom of Estoll had gone. In fact, far more people seemed to welcome the latest developments with open arms. William was not wrong to say that he was powerless, and Grascas could not defy a royal command, but even so, they had to do something. They had to fight. Otherwise, Estoll’s corruption would lead to greater misery.

“I’ve caused great trouble for you...” said William. “And for Tina...”

“Nothing will come of clinging to the past,” Grascas said, clenching his fist tight in defiance of the dark cloud that had settled on the castle. “You and I must live in the present world.”

‡

Southeast of the king’s castle, the noble township of Sharron was said to be the most refined district of the capital of Estoll. It was the best part of town, reserved for important noble families close to the king or the descendants of famous heroes. Those who resided there were said to be the champions of Estoll.

In the best part of the township stood a particular mansion that served as a gathering place for the nobility and the envy of the commoners. It was far from the castle, but home to the most powerful noble family in Sharron. And in one

chamber in that mansion, a woman was busy giving orders to the staff.

“Go fetch the tea and sweets, won’t you?” she said, sounding for all the world to hear like a queen on her throne.

Analissia Rainfiel, the master of this mansion, was the child of a master wizard and a noblewoman from a prestigious house that had served the royal family for generations. She was young, but she had already inherited a noble title. And thanks to her prodigious talent, she had been appointed to the post of prime minister.

A beautiful girl with bright blonde hair and wearing a plain servant’s garb hastened to obey Analissia’s command. She set the table with plates of fancy sweets and a steaming pot of hot tea. That was all Analissia had asked. She waved her hand, dismissing the girl as if she were nothing but a tool. The girl bowed deeply and left without a sound.

Then came a quiet knock at the door. “Come in!” said Analissia. Her voice was overflowing with kindness, completely unlike the tone it had had when she was addressing her servant. She affected a falsetto, laughing brightly as her guest entered the room. “Welcome home, Izuna! Come! I’ve had some tea prepared for you. Let us drink a cup together.”

“Thank you, sister...” said Izuna. Her voice was so faint it was hard to hear that she was talking.

“What’s wrong?” Analissia asked, worried about the girl. “Come, now. Over here.” She beckoned Izuna over and the girl dutifully tottered forward, hesitatingly sitting down on the very edge of her chair. She looked left and right, not touching the sweets that had been laid out for her. After a while, she seemed to make up her mind about something and opened her mouth to speak.

“U-Um...sister...I... The water is all dried up,” she said, blurting out the bad news. “There’s nothing there. And I didn’t see anyone. I wasn’t able to do what you asked...” Her bangs fell over her eyes, which were squeezed shut.

“I see.” Analissia couldn’t help giggling a bit at her fearful, miserable-looking sister. “Hee hee... Good girl, Izuna. You delivered that report very well.”

“Are you not...angry?”

“I’m not. I know you did everything you could. And I have a reward for you for trying so hard! I’m sure you’ll like them—they’re macarons.” Analissia handed her sister one of the sweets and petted her head. She seemed to have calmed down a bit.

In reality, the news was quite upsetting to Analissia. Privately, she had the strong urge to go on snapping her tongue and screaming all sorts of invective, but she was not so foolish as to risk losing the trust of such an important pawn.

Analissia had made a bargain to obtain nothing less than the salvation of the ancient bloodline. If she couldn’t deliver on her end, however, her life would be forfeit. The pains she had taken to dominate the kingdom of Estoll hadn’t been for her own benefit either. According to what Izuna had told her, the seal was already broken and the maiden long gone.

Well, then... she wondered. Who could possibly have broken the hero’s seal? Or did it simply degrade naturally over time? It isn’t a seal one could break easily, and it would be quite dangerous if it were broken improperly. But be that as it may, I must find where our tomboy of a Sleeping Beauty has wandered off to...

News of the Battle of the Dragon had reached Estoll. People had been gossiping about an ancient demon in the modern world for weeks now. But it shouldn’t have been possible for mere humans to defeat an ancient demon. The tale was likely exaggerated. Perhaps they had attacked the Sleeping Beauty when she had just woken up and was still disoriented.

It was difficult to guess where she would be now. If she’d left Sindoria, she might have made for the Heptarchy, or perhaps the Empire. It was also possible that she’d made a beeline for the Holy Land, but Analissia certainly hoped she would not be so foolish as to attack an opponent who had defeated her once already without any semblance of a plan. If they did a search of the area, it shouldn’t be too hard to find her. The real problem was what to do if she wouldn’t listen to reason. She could be quite a difficult child sometimes. With the war having only just begun, Analissia’s life shouldn’t be in too much danger.

Izuna had quietly nibbled away at her macarons until they were finished and

was now fidgeting restlessly in her seat.

“Thank you, Izuna,” Analissia said. “I’m sorry to have sent you on such a long journey. Why don’t you go say hello to your mother and father? I’m sure they’re eager to dote on you.”

“Okay...” Izuna said as she made her way out of the room. “Thank you... Goodbye...”

Analissia kept a smile on her face until Izuna was gone, but the second she was out of sight, her expression changed back to the haughty, condescending look she had worn before. “No thought of what she is doing...or what is being done to her...” Of course, it was she who had groomed Izuna to be that way, but hearing her say “thank you,” of all things, she couldn’t help but think it. “Ah... What a truly idiotic girl.”

‡

“Wha-ha... Wha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Aisha cried as they soared through the sky at top speed. “Don’t drop me! Please, please, please, *please* don’t drop me!”

“I would never!” said Nacht. “That was just a bit of teasing.”

“Teasing?! I could have died!”

“Thank you again for choosing to ride the high-speed Nacht Express today,” Nacht joked. “Get ready for an even more thrilling journey through the sky as we approach our destination, Estoll.”

“If you keep this up, I’m going to lose my temper for real!”

Nacht and Aisha flew along as they had their back-and-forth, passing over the Leegh mountain range that separated Sindoria from Estoll. The kingdoms were linked by the Great Tunnel of Leegh, said to have been excavated by the ancient demons. No matter how it was made, it had remained in pristine condition until the present.

The tunnel was the main land route to Estoll, but now, there was a company of royal soldiers stationed at the entrance, limiting traffic. Nacht could see a few scouting parties, but by the looks of things, Sindoria did not intend to hold their ground at the tunnel. Rather, their plan must have been to allow Estoll’s

forces to enter Sindorian territory before attacking.

“Going by air was the right choice,” Nacht said. “It doesn’t look like they’re letting carriages through.”

“I wish we could have gone by carriage...” Aisha sobbed. “It would have been a much more relaxing journey...”

“Don’t be like that, Aisha! Look, we’re almost past the mountains!”

“They keep getting taller and taller...” Aisha said.

Indeed, before their eyes was a spire of stone that seemed to reach up into the heavens. Beyond it, more and more tall mountains jutted out through the cloud tops. Nacht flew deftly between them, using wind magic to carry Aisha along as she enjoyed the beauty of nature—the deep blues and greens of the mountains. Here and there, she spotted roc nests or wyverns flying around making a clamor. To Nacht, these monsters were nothing more than parts of the scenery.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s beautiful.”

“Wh-What was that?” Aisha flinched. “It sounded like a roar!”

“There’s all kinds of monsters fighting over territory in the Leegh mountains!” said Nacht. “Wyverns and lightning tigers and black serpents... It’s a high-level area, you know. Even veteran adventurers usually keep clear of it.”

“You sound so cheerful when you say that...” Aisha mumbled.

That was why, for ordinary people, the only way to get to Estoll was through the ancient tunnel. There was also the option of going all the way around through the Heptarchy, but that would take far, far too much time. Boats went to Estoll from the eastern sea as well, but in a time of war, any boats headed that way would almost certainly be destroyed.

“Only you would try to cross the border in the middle of a war, Mistress,” Aisha sighed at Nacht’s explanation.

“Ha ha ha! The petty machinations of mere humans aren’t about to stop me!” Nacht laughed.

“Sometimes it’s important to wait, though, Mistress...” Aisha grumbled. But

Nacht had no desire to wait where she was and stagnate—even more so if that stagnation was imposed by outside forces. It was Nacht's nature to press forward. Taking the time to gaze at Aisha's sleeping face was all the waiting around she needed.

Nacht casually overpowered the monsters that came to attack them as they flew through the sky, humming cheerily the whole time.

"It looks like there are fewer and fewer monsters around..." Aisha said. "Am I just imagining it? I mean, I'm glad to be safe, it's just..."

Aisha's perception was just a little off. In fact, the monsters had started getting out of the way as the pair approached as a gesture of goodwill. They passed three, then four more peaks, and finally, the plains of Estoll stretched out before them.

"We're almost out of the mountains," said Nacht. "Soon, we'll be in Estoll."

"That was fast!" Aisha marveled. "You know, flying wasn't so bad once I got used to it."

"I used my magic to shield you from the outside world, after all," Nacht said, puffing out her chest. "Isn't it fun?"

"Why didn't you do that from the start?" Aisha demanded.

"It's delicate work, you know!" said Nacht. "It took me a while to get it right."

Aisha saw through Nacht's excuse. She narrowed her eyes. "And the *real* reason?"

"I wanted to see your face when you got all spooked! I'm not sorry and I'd totally do it again."

"Mistress, you dummy..."

Nacht didn't want to push her servant's patience too far. For the rest of the trip, even after they'd made it over the mountains and slowed down, Nacht kept using her wind magic to shield Aisha.

"Um..." Aisha said, "Do you think it's about time to land...?" Even with the shielding, she was getting tired of flying and wanted a chance to rest. And now that flat ground was within sight, she was positively excited about the prospect.

Nacht, of course, had no intention of forcing Aisha past her limits. She nodded and made to descend—but then immediately pulled up.

“Weh!” Aisha cried. “Wh-Why are we going higher?!” But the answer was right before her eyes. She heard the sound of metal-clad men marching in orderly files. She looked and saw an army of tens of thousands of humans advancing with great force. “Is that...the Estoll army?”

“Yeah. That’s the attacking force. They look pretty disciplined, but...” Nacht’s golden-ringed eyes opened wide, revealing the true nature of things. “Something’s off. There’s something else mixed into their ranks...”

The first thing that caught her eye was a unit dressed in black robes. There was something unnatural about their movement. Marching at their head was a woman wearing red robes. Or, to be more precise, something that had taken the form of a woman. It was strange. For as much as the army looked like a unified force on the outside, it seemed that it was actually composed of two armies marching together.

“Did they see us?” Aisha asked.

“Maybe. We flew right over the attacking army, after all. They might even construe that as hostile behavior!”

“Why does it sound like you’re having fun?!” Aisha lamented.

It wouldn’t be out of the question for a major kingdom like Sindoria to employ flying scouts. If they mistook Nacht and Aisha for something like that...

“Aisha, I’m speeding up.”

“Weh?!” Aisha cried out, her voice cracking as Nacht did just as she’d said, streaking through the sky fast enough to leave afterimages as a ball of fire zoomed past her, narrowly missing. She rose high in the sky, speeding through the clouds and coming to rest high above the heavens. The woman in the red robe had to be a pretty good mage to launch an attack against Nacht when she was so high in the sky.

“Weeehhh! They’re attacking us, Mistress!”

The attacks were pretty forceful too. Nacht wheeled around twice, then a

third time, holding Aisha in her arms as she dodged them at speeds that would put any roller coaster to shame.

“Wait! W-Waaahhh! Mistress! Stoop!” Aisha pleaded. She could hardly tell what was going on around her. Not wanting to leave the muddled girl behind, Nacht stopped in midair. She sighed as Aisha struggled to catch her breath.

“Are you sure you want me to stop, Aisha?” Nacht asked.

“Weh?”

The pair was still under attack. Hanging still in midair like that, they made for an excellent target. Even Aisha realized it when she calmed her nerves and looked down—an enormous ball of fire was flying in their direction.

“Is it hot in here or is it just me?” asked Nacht.

“I-It’s hot! It’s hotter than hot!” Aisha squeezed her eyes shut, preparing herself for impact as the heat washed over her.

“Then let’s turn down the heat!” Nacht said, smiling reassuringly. “*Ars Glacies: Immortal Crystal!*” Her mana surged up and an array of magic circles appeared beneath them, each transforming into a great mass of clear blue ice. They fell like snow from the sky, swallowing the world beneath them in a field of blue and extinguishing the fire. It was as if the blazing inferno had never existed in the first place. The ice began to crack, shards falling to the earth and robbing it of its heat. The soldiers shivered, their breath coming out in steamy white puffs as they faced the beautiful but fierce torrent of ice.

“That might have been a bit too much ice, Mistress...” Aisha muttered, shocked.

“Ha ha ha! It was self-defense! Don’t blame me!” Nacht grinned.

The Estoll army was in a bit of disarray after such a bracing counterattack, but they were lucky that Nacht was merciful. None among their ranks were badly injured.

“I’m not gonna get involved in the war or anything...” Nacht said, “But maybe I’ll ask Theresia for a reward for that one.”

“Kerchoo!” Aisha sneezed.

“Reanna!” barked Grascas. “What are you doing?! I didn’t tell you to attack!”

Reanna, however, didn’t seem to be listening. She was hunched over, grinning raptly. “Ah!” she exclaimed. “What elegant magic! Just imagine the kind of control one would need to perform a spell of such a caliber! And to do it while flying and utilizing wind magic as well.”

“Tch. No mind for anything but magic, eh?”

“Oh! General Grascas!” Reanna said without a hint of contrition in her voice. “I didn’t realize you were there!” The young prodigy, who had earned the office of chief court wizard, had a hunger for magic that went beyond that of anyone Grascas had ever known. She was practically an addict, spending every second of every day mastering her spellcraft. All she seemed to have a mind for was honing her own abilities. It seemed as if she thought of the war itself as just another training exercise. To Grascas, she was quite the headache.

“I told you not to act on your own! Why did you attack?!”

“Well, they were flying right above the army, weren’t they? I assumed they were hostile and attacked. Is that wrong? They might be enemy spies, you know. I thought it would be better to shoot them down than let them get away. Do you disagree?”

“You have a point,” said Grascas. “But I am the one in command of this army. Your careless attack got us hit by a nasty spell. You’ve hurt the army’s morale. *That* is the result of your actions, you understand? Now, you are to refrain from further independent action.”

“It wasn’t independent action, though. His Majesty ordered me to lead the Black Legion. I am not under your command, General.”

Yes. That was exactly the issue. Surely nobody would be so foolish as to think one army should have two commanders. They may have been two armies cooperating, each with their own leader, but in the end, they were both armies of Estoll. It stood to reason that they should act as one. And yet, by royal edict, Grascas’s authority did not extend to Reanna.

Her black-clad army was the reason the weak-kneed king and his ministers

had confidence that they would win the war the prime minister had sweet-talked them into. Their number was five thousand. But combined with the forces under Grascas's banner, they still only numbered twenty-five thousand soldiers. The kingdom of Sindoria could easily muster an army two or three times that size, and that would not even reflect the totality of their fighting strength. If they really went all out, they could muster a force ten times the size of Estoll's army.

"Do you not see that your attack caused damage to your own forces?" Grascas demanded.

"Hee hee hee! I don't see the problem with that. Now, stop worrying and get back to marching, if you please. We *are* on a schedule." She smiled. She seemed to be saying that they should leave the injured behind.

Grascas, for his part, felt miserable. "Just no more rash actions. Let's avoid taking casualties if we can."

This was an invasion. If they met their opponent in the open field, their chances of victory fell even further. They had demanded the cooperation of merchants who traded with Sindoria, but their familiarity with the terrain only went so far. And yet, the war had been met with unanimous approval. That itself spoke to the extent of the prime minister's authority in the country.

It had been a scant few years since the king, who had been improving as a ruler, suddenly announced that his wife had returned from the dead. Since then, the kingdom had changed immensely. It had become twisted.

Grascas was a soldier. It had been immediately obvious to him that they stood no chance of winning. The prince had agreed and given Grascas a secret order: to withdraw before their army suffered too much damage.

"Don't worry, General!" Reanna's eyes shone with a sinister light. "Our objective is the downfall of Sindoria. We have more than enough fighting power for that. Now, advance! For Estoll!"

Reanna was a delicate, flighty, beautiful girl who had no place on the battlefield. A less suspicious person might look at her and raise their voice in wonder to find such a girl here of all places. But Grascas was certain that the girl's smile was that of a devil.

Estoll was a land to the northeast, reigned over by an independent monarchy. In the olden days, it was nothing more than one of several small kingdoms struggling against the Holy Land's domination, but since forming an alliance with the kingdom of Sindoria and adopting the Order of the Elect as its official religion, its status in the world had risen, making it the most significant of the minor kingdoms. It was in a relatively secure position, wedged between the Leegh mountain range and the Caves of Celgg, and the south of the kingdom was rich in magic steel and other ores. Most of the lands to the east, including Sindoria and the Heptarchy, used imported Estollian ore.

Perhaps it was due to the war, but the outskirts of Estoll hadn't seemed like they saw much traffic. The capital, however, was a different story. Euto Fia, the capital of Estoll, was full of bustling life—so much so that it hardly seemed to be a time of war. There was a long line of merchants and adventurers and villagers all awaiting inspection at the city gate.

Aisha grabbed Nacht's arm.

"Hey there," Nacht said. "Something the matter?"

"We shouldn't sneak into the city..."

"We shouldn't?" Nacht blinked innocently.

"No, we shouldn't!" Aisha said. "I want to follow the rules. Oh, don't make that face, Mistress..."

They had been in line for thirty minutes. Aisha could tell that Nacht's patience was running out.

"But you know," Nacht said, "we're a pair of unknown travelers coming to the royal capital. If we were in Sindoria I could name-drop Theresia or Elenora, but you know they might not let us in, right?"

"That would be terrible!" Aisha said. "Or...would it?" Ordinarily, being refused entrance to the city would be a tremendous problem. Safe and comfortable sleeping arrangements were of self-explanatory importance, but Nacht had her Second Home. There was no need to worry about where they were going to sleep.

“Of course it would!” Nacht said. “Don’t you wanna see the sights?”

Viewed from the sky, the city of Euto Fia had a charm completely unlike that of Free Market City. The urge to explore it was tugging at Nacht’s heart. The castle gates. The street lamps. The iron buildings. The intricate metalwork decorating every inch of the city. It was all very appealing. It was a feat of engineering that made clear the quality of Estoll’s craftspeople.

“If that’s all, let’s do it right and wait.” Aisha’s tone sounded a bit scolding, so Nacht decided to pass the time by squeezing her servant’s cheeks. “H-Hey!” she protested. “S-Stop that!”

Nacht spent a delightful hour teasing Aisha. Then, finally, they arrived in front of the gate.

“You may pass.”

“Fine...” Nacht started to say, her voice preemptively dejected. “Wait, really?!” Nacht had identified herself as merely “a traveler” and given the guard an extra generous toll payment in place of proof of her identity. She was flabbergasted that they were being let through so easily.

“I mean, look at how you’re dressed, milady! You’re a noblewoman, aren’t you? We’ve been getting a lot of you lately—nobles on some secret mission using an assumed name. But I can’t believe you ventured out dressed like that, milady! I’m glad you made it here safely.”

Nacht was wearing an elegant dress and Aisha was in a maid uniform. Even ignorant children understood the principle that one received favorable treatment based on their social status. If you couldn’t make it through the city gate, what was even the point of being a noble?

“The development zone is to the southeast,” the guard said, cheerfully waving them off. “Good luck, milady. I hope we meet again.” It was a bit anticlimactic after the long wait.

“I’m glad we made it through so easily!” Aisha chirped.

They made their way cheerfully through the carriages and wagons waiting outside the gate. Nacht may not have been satisfied with waiting in line, but they had made it in. Her thoughts were already on what lay beyond them.

They stood in front of the great iron gate that separated the capital from the outside world. Nacht took a step forward and suddenly gasped. She was struck with an immediate sense of unease as if she had stepped on a trap plate in a dungeon, and she felt a piercing alarm ring out as if it had detected the presence of an intruder.

She protectively pulled Aisha in close. “Weh?!” Aisha cried. Nacht felt something touch her back—something intangible like the wind. But it lasted for only a moment. Nacht looked around to see humans going about their business like nothing had happened.

“What...was that?” Nacht asked.

Aisha seemed utterly bewildered. “M-Mistress?” she said. Nacht clutched the girl close to her chest and began taking in as much of the area as she could with her golden Dragon Eyes.

She saw everything from the line of people stretching outside the walls to the inside of the merchants’ wagons to the guards stationed far, far away. She saw from the depths of the earth to the far reaches of the sky. Not even a single ant escaped her notice. And her vision was not just material—it also showed her the movement of magic and living souls. She didn’t know who or what she was looking for, but she channeled her powers, searching everywhere for the source of the unease she had felt. And yet, to her astonishment, she could find nothing.

“What does this mean...?” she said. If the person who did that hadn’t been nearby, they must have attacked her using some sort of special ability. But it would take someone extraordinary to not only avoid Nacht’s awareness but overcome her resistance as well. Nacht could have easily resisted a spell like Peep Eye, and if they had been using an item like the Eye of the Spirits or the Sixfold Creeping Eyes, which she happened to own, her Ancient-tier Bodyless Earring accessory should have prevented her from being detected.

Maybe it’s someone who can use Clairvoyance... Nacht mused, but then rejected that train of thought. If that had been the case, she would certainly have seen them watching her. “Then what could it possibly be...?” she said out loud.

Aisha squirmed against Nacht's chest. Nacht had been standing still in the middle of the road, lost in thought while clutching Aisha tight in her arms. Aisha had turned quite red from the treatment, so much so that she looked like she had just gotten out of the bath. "Um..." she said. "Mistress? Everyone's staring..."

It was probably too much to expect Nacht not to stand out, but now everyone in the vicinity was staring directly at her—a beautiful girl holding another girl tight in the middle of the road. Some of the people around were whistling or cracking jokes. Nacht didn't mind being the center of attention, but Aisha was trembling with embarrassment.

"It's just...maybe we should do this somewhere with less people..." Aisha went on. She had hoped the words would get Nacht to loosen her grip, but they had the opposite effect. Aisha's timid voice only spurred Nacht's sadistic side. The onlookers' jokes and jeers got louder. It was like everyone watching could sense what Nacht was feeling. They watched intently to see what she would do.

Nacht leaned in, pressing her lips against Aisha's ears as if intending to give the crowd what they wanted.

"Um..." Aisha protested. "Um, um um..."

"Did you feel something off earlier?" Nacht whispered.

"Something...off?" Aisha asked quietly. "No, nothing..."

Nacht was pretty sure Aisha also said something else. Something like "Mistress! Get off me!" But she ignored that part and kept holding Aisha tight. It was very possible that they were in danger. This was just being safe.

"I don't think I imagined it..." Nacht said. She once again began running through possibilities in her head, squeezing the trembling Aisha tighter and tighter in her arms.

"Th-That's enough! I can't take any more!" Aisha shook free from Nacht's arms, her face as red as a ripe tomato. The audience seemed to let out a cry. They looked as disappointed as Nacht did to no longer have Aisha in her arms. "Why are *you* on their side, Mistress?"

"Because my Aisha got away!"

Quite a crowd had formed around them, and Aisha seemed ready to bolt at any second. There was nothing to do but press farther on into the city. Nacht held Aisha's hand as they walked—it was very possible that they were in danger, after all.

Euto Fia did not feel at all like a city in a kingdom at war. The open-air markets were filled with cheerful voices, and the people they saw going about their lives had smiles on their faces. Nacht bought a bottle of fruit juice from the Giellaria Forest and handed it to Aisha, who happily took a big gulp, smiling delightedly as the raspberry-like juice filled her mouth. "It's sour but sweet," Aisha said. "I like it!"

"That's khuko fruit!" the merchant said. "The balance of sour to sweet changes depending on the time of day. You can learn about people's tastes by seeing when they like it best!"

They looked around as they walked through the market. None of the stalls or stores seemed to have any shortage of food. The price of wheat, which was largely imported from Sindoria, had gone up, it seemed, but only by a little bit. It appeared that the kingdom's preparations for war had gone surprisingly smoothly.

"This is such a busy city!" said Aisha. "And everyone's wearing such nice clothes."

"The ornamentation in the city is really something," Nacht agreed. "It looks like their craftsmen have branched out to clothing and accessories too. Do you wanna buy something, Aisha?"

"Oh! No, thank you. The clothing you gave me is more than enough, Mistress."

"I see. Well, if you see anything you want, don't hesitate to ask." Aisha was a servant by name, but her mistress Nacht hadn't exactly been paying her a salary. This was her way of telling Aisha that she could always ask for things she wanted. But Aisha almost never asked for things. After all, what she really wanted was for Nacht to depend on her.

"I wish you wouldn't treat me like a child..." Aisha pouted. "And besides, this juice you got me is super-duper good." Aisha smiled happily, and Nacht decided

not to press the matter.

“But it’s strange...” Nacht said.

“Hm? What is?”

“Win or lose, war is a tragedy that brings misfortune to the common people. The enemy is a longtime allied kingdom too. But everyone’s going about their business like normal. There’s something weird going on here...”

“I never heard anything about wars back when I lived in my village...” said Aisha. “Maybe they just don’t know that it’s happening?”

“Maybe if this was a pioneer village on the frontier,” Nacht said. “But this is the capital, isn’t it? Maybe the rulers are just really good at running a country. If people have enough food and clothing and shelter, you can get them to go along with pretty much anything.”

Euto Fia had no slums. Or to be more precise, it no longer had slums. A few years ago, the current prime minister had expanded the markets and made poverty relief a matter of official policy. The slums were destroyed and made into open fields, which they called the “special development zone.” The merchants had brought in a great deal of money, and a fresh workforce appeared from seemingly nowhere, relieving the people of want.

Then, there was a technological revolution. The textile industry was expanded, with new technologies raising production speeds through the roof and protecting the poor from the cold. The government built cheap housing for orphans and the infirm and created an employment agency to match residents of the city with appropriate work. They opened academies that taught commercial and military science to all, irrespective of background. And in the special development zone to the southeast, they built and built and built.

The people of the city had all the necessities of life. Some of them had come to call the special development zone a sacred land of mystery.

“I guess it’s good that the city is prosperous, at least,” Nacht said. “What about it, Aisha? You wanna see this special development zone of theirs?”

There were a number of things that put Nacht on edge about this city, such as the incident at the gate and the whole atmosphere of the place, but nobody

had threatened them yet. As long as that continued to hold true, Nacht was happy to simply explore the city to her satisfaction and then head off on their journey.

“I do,” said Aisha. “But we’re just sightseeing, right? Promise we’re just sightseeing?”

“You make me sound like such a troublemaker,” Nacht complained.

“You are! You know you are, Mistress! You were attacked by the soldiers and you even fought back! Are you sure they aren’t going to arrest us?” Aisha seemed anxious, but Nacht didn’t see any problems with what she had done—that had merely been self-defense.

“They started it,” she said.

“I mean, that’s true...” Aisha admitted. “But didn’t you go a bit too far?”

A little too *forceful* was what Aisha meant. It was true that they had attacked Nacht, but Nacht had more than enough power to have simply laughed it off. Instead, Aisha had seen her mistress mercilessly attack an army of humans. But that was her mistaken impression.

“I didn’t attack *people*,” Nacht said. “Did you see those guys in black? They were shaped like humans, but they were just constructs. I didn’t sense mortal souls in them—or demon souls, for that matter. If I had to guess, I’d say they’re golems. I think they’re being used for labor in the city as well.”

Aisha’s eyes opened wide. “Weh?! They weren’t people?! You’re messing with me, aren’t you, Mistress?”

“Messing with you? I would never.”

“Then *please* stop embarrassing me in front of other people!”

“I don’t know if I can promise that.”

“*Mistress!*”

Hand in hand, the two cheerfully made their way through the city. The closer they got to the special development zone, the busier everyone around them seemed. Nacht looked around as she walked, keeping an eye out for an inn that might suit Aisha’s tastes. Then, suddenly, Aisha stopped in her tracks.

“Aisha?” Nacht asked. But Aisha didn’t respond.

Or rather, Aisha didn’t seem to be able to respond. Her face had gone pale white. She was frozen so stiff that it was like time itself had stopped moving. She wasn’t even breathing. Dumbfounded, she opened her eyes wide and closed them again. She shook her head, clutching it in her hands. “No...” she said, her voice wavering like the reflection of the moon on water.

Aisha was staring at a man with ferocious intensity. She showed no signs of movement. It was like she had been hit by an illusion. Nacht looked over at the man. His eyes, she thought, looked like Aisha’s.

“Oh, Aisha!” said the man. “You sure took your time! Welcome home!”

Aisha’s knees gave out and she fell to the ground. Her eyes shook. Her lips trembled. Her voice sounded pinched and scratchy. “How...?” she asked. “P-Papa? How are you...alive?”

‡

Aisha would be the first to admit that her memory wasn’t very good. But her most precious memories were still fresh in her mind. When she was young, she would often go to the bank of the river outside the village to play in the water and fish, or sometimes just to listen to the voices of the spirits. It was a peaceful way to spend her time, and she would often stay until the sun had set.

She would come home covered in mud, and her father would greet her with warmth in his voice, saying, “Oh, Aisha! You sure took your time! Welcome home!”

Aisha would never forget those words as long as she lived. She knew without a doubt that they were her father’s words. She was certain of it. And yet...

“This isn’t real!” she sobbed to herself. Aisha’s memories were telling her that the person in front of her was her father, but her heart wouldn’t accept the scene before her eyes. Aisha had not moved past her father’s abrupt parting. Her heart still bore the wounds of the experience.

The thing with her father’s form was silent.

Aisha’s vision went dark—so dark that she could see nothing at all. Her body

felt like it was being ripped apart by the pain and sorrow inside her. But more than anything, she felt bitter regret. She had nothing but contempt for the foolish girl she had been, who could do nothing but lament as her father's body grew weaker and the villagers hurled insults her way. She could not forgive herself.

When Nacht met Aisha, Aisha had not been afraid to die. Rather, her only wish had been to die alongside her father. But Nacht had saved her. Nacht valued her when she wouldn't value herself. Nacht had said that she needed her and told her to stay by her side. That was why Aisha had decided that everything she was belonged to Nacht. Her place was by her mistress's side and nowhere else. She had been a husk of a person, and Nacht's words had given her a reason to live. They gave her life meaning.

Nacht had even brought Aisha back to her village with the intent of helping her come to terms with her father's death. Nacht had told Aisha that she'd done nothing wrong, but even so, Aisha couldn't manage to forgive herself. She had made up her mind to live with Nacht, without pardoning her past self's weakness.

She remembered her father's last words. *"I'm sorry. I won't be able to protect you any longer... I wasn't able to keep my promises. Not to you, and not to Floria. I love you, Aisha. Forgive me..."* Yes. Her father was already gone. Aisha's bottomless regret served no purpose. It was too late. There was nothing she could do.

That was why Aisha wanted to become strong. She was sick of bemoaning her own weakness. She was going to do everything she could to become powerful, gain knowledge, and hone her technique. All so that she would never have to feel that way again.

"How...? This can't be real! My father is..." Tears welled up in Aisha's eyes as she stared at her father's gentle smile—the smile she thought she would never see again. The thing she had lost, that she saw in her dreams. It was before her, like something out of a fantasy.

"What's wrong, Aisha?" he said. "Good luck itself's gonna run away from you if you keep making faces like that!" Those words. That dependable demeanor

with just a hint of childishness. Everything was exactly like the father Aisha had known.

“Pa...pa...” Aisha didn’t realize she had said the word until it was out of her mouth. She knew it was an illusion, but a part of her wanted to leap right into her father’s arms. She took a step forward, then gasped. Beside her, Nacht was seething with fury. Aisha stopped dead in her tracks and timidly looked up at her mistress.

Nacht’s expression was severe—far more severe than Aisha normally saw. She looked at Nacht’s father with cold disgust, as if he were something filthy. No, it was more than that. Nacht’s eyes showed nothing but murderous hatred, strong enough to make Aisha’s body tremble despite itself. Then, without warning, Nacht was gone. Aisha’s eyes were too slow to follow her movements, but she knew perfectly well what her mistress was about to do.

“Mistress!” Aisha cried. “Wait!”

By the time Aisha noticed what was happening, Nacht had already reached her father. Her red nails were touching the base of his neck. If Aisha’s shout had been a second later, his head would have already been removed from his body.

“Aisha.” Nacht’s voice sent a shiver down Aisha’s spine. It sounded cool and indifferent, but that only made it feel direr. There was no enmity or coercion directed at Aisha in that voice, but the anger and malice she felt for Aisha’s father came through loud and clear. Aisha was shaking. “No power can bring the dead back to life.” Nacht met Aisha’s eyes. “The soul dies, and then it moves on. Do you want to make a mockery of your father’s death?”

Aisha said nothing. She merely lowered her gaze.

“I don’t know what trick is at play here,” Nacht continued, “but this is nothing more than a doll someone made. I know it hurts. I know it’s sad. I know you want to cling to the past. But your father is dead. You know that, right?” Her voice was cold and factual.

Aisha knew perfectly well that her father was dead, of course. She had felt his hand grow cold as she held it in her own. She remembered the day, the time, and the place. “B-But...” she said. “He talks like my father. Only my father would say it like that...”

Aisha's memories were telling her that this was her father. Not a single word he had said was out of place. His expressions, his mannerisms...all of it aligned with the father that existed in her memories. There was no way a stranger could have possibly produced such a perfect doll. There was no way Aisha would be fooled by mere artifice. If there was a chance—even the slightest chance—that her father's soul and memories had come to dwell in this body, she couldn't simply let him die.

But Nacht wasn't having it. "I'll say it one more time. This isn't your father."

Aisha knew that Nacht's eyes could see things that her own could not. She was sure that her mistress was telling her the truth. But still. Despite that, Aisha simply couldn't be as certain as Nacht seemed to be. Without intending to, she had contradicted her mistress. She was horribly confused. What should she do? What would be the correct thing to do? She stood there, uncertain, while Nacht continued to speak.

"You'll understand once I destroy it," she said.

Nothing could resist Nacht if she were to lay her hands upon it. She could easily send Aisha's father's neck flying if she wanted.

"Wait...!" Aisha said. "P-Please, Mistress! Don't do it! I still... I still haven't..."

It was a sudden, impossible reunion. Aisha didn't have the first idea as to what was happening, but it felt too sad for it to end. Seeing her father die before her eyes a second time would be too much to bear.

Aisha heard her mistress sigh. "All right," Nacht said, her voice heavy with disappointment. "I'll give you some time before I expose this detestable illusion for what it is. Think carefully until then, and try to find your answer." Nacht removed her crimson nails from where they had been digging into the flesh of Aisha's father's neck. But she did not return to Aisha's side. "But if, when the time comes, you decide that you'd prefer to play with this doll, then you are no longer my servant."

They were, without a doubt, words of parting. And so saying, Nacht left Aisha all alone.

A girl sat on the roof of a church-like building decorated with an emblem of a dragon, sulking miserably despite the perfect weather. Her dress, Night's Embrace, fluttered ephemerally in the breeze, enshrouding her in its darkness.

"Haaaaaah..." Nacht let out a long, dispirited breath. Anyone who happened to see her there and hear her sighs couldn't help but fall into misery themselves. She was just that dejected. She sat looking up at the sky with empty eyes, her arms outstretched. If someone looked up at her from below right now, they would get a clear view of her rose-pink panties, but that was the furthest thing from her mind.

There was only one thing that could have sent Nacht into such a deep depression. "Aisha hates me..." she whimpered in a voice that sounded hardly anything like her own. She had been saying those words over and over dozens if not hundreds of times, her mind playing out frantic worst-case scenarios over and over again. "I said something terrible to her... She'll definitely be angry..."

To Nacht, who reigned over the workings of the soul, death was quite close to her own domain. The people who'd made that doll had brought insult to death itself and deceived her Aisha. Before she knew it, she had become enraged, and in the end, she had even lashed out at Aisha. Aisha hadn't even done anything wrong. Nacht had been the one trying to force her own perspective on the situation.

"Haah..." she sighed again, disappointed with herself. She should have found more proof and persuaded Aisha properly. She hadn't been thinking about what proof Aisha would accept or what methods she would approve of. That was her own fault.

Unfortunately, Nacht didn't know the true nature of the doll in question. None of the methods she knew of for giving personality or memories to a doll seemed quite right. If it was created by a spellcaster, it would most likely fall into one of the categories of doll, golem, or puppet.

A doll seemed the most plausible, given the ones Nacht had seen going to war or laboring in the special development zone in their human forms. Dolls, after all, could be mass-produced. They were matter given form by magic, with their strength dependent on the materials that made them up. It was a relatively

easy way for a mage to gain some fighting power. A master of Dollcraft could turn a lump of clay into a servant with a level above 100. Depending on the materials, it wasn't out of the question for them to pass for a human as well.

Even so, they were no more than dolls. They couldn't be given the memories of someone from the past and act exactly as that person once did. Moreover, Aisha had arrived at the city only today when the doll had adopted her father's words and mannerisms. Nacht could think of no skill or item that could accomplish such a feat.

"But I didn't need to do *that*..."

This was a phenomenon even Nacht didn't understand. It was only natural that Aisha would feel something, even if it did amount to blasphemy against her beloved father. Nacht could see the movement and color and shape of one's soul clearly, but Aisha could only see the doll with her naked eyes. She had no way of discerning that it was an empty, soulless husk. Of course she would doubt Nacht's words and fight back. Nacht should have known that, and yet she'd allowed herself to say some truly unkind things. And then, she had run away, too afraid to look at Aisha. It was pathetic. Nacht felt like she was going to cry.

But make no mistake. Everything she'd said to the girl was true.

"*Summon Sin Avatar: Envy of Leviathan.*" When Nacht spoke those words, a darkness seemed to well up from somewhere far underground, coalescing into the shape of a woman. She had long, translucent hair that seemed to be made of seawater and was veiled in a sweet, tantalizing aroma. Her eyes were a deep crimson, with rings of dark dots encircling her pupils that bewitched all who gazed into them. Everything about her, from her appearance to her ineffable presence, was both unsettling and utterly captivating. She had the freedom to choose her own form and appearance, but today, she had chosen to look just slightly older than Nacht. This was Levi.

"Hey! You called for me, Mistress?" the devil said in an affected prideful voice. "It's been quite some time. Did something come up?"



There were more kinds of beings one could summon in Real World Online than Nacht could even list. Angels, fairies, spirits, monsters, magic beasts, phantasms, divine spirits, the dead, and devils, to name a few. Among them, the skills required for summoning devils were relatively difficult to acquire. To be more precise, it was a skill that chose its user.

In order to summon devils, one had to force them to submit through their own strength. It had to be done via a one-on-one battle with no outside assistance. Since summoners were, as a rule, mages, and mages struggled in solo combat, it was a very difficult feat. Toru had accomplished it with his second character, a healer, only to find it to be a completely useless ability.

The difficulty of acquiring devils made them unpopular summons. The closer to one's own level a devil was, the greater was the risk to the caster's life needed to gain its allegiance. Leviathan was originally a level 138 field boss whom Nacht had overcome in a desperate struggle. With the power of the real-money store and an Ultimate-tier item gifted to her by her supporters, she had somehow managed to win. After all, Levi's power of envy wasn't too different from Nacht's.

"I have a job for you, Levi. Keep guard over my Aisha. This whole situation is fishy as hell."

"You summoned the likes of *me* for that?" Levi asked, flabbergasted and disappointed. Levi was fairly well-behaved, but devils were manifestations of negativity. They left ruin in their wake like balls of pure destruction. Nacht could tell by looking at her that Levi was powerful enough to easily wipe a kingdom or two off the face of this world. She had enshrouded herself in her azure mana, expecting some great task.

"I can think of no task more important than keeping my Aisha safe," said Nacht. "Besides, better safe than sorry."

"Haah..." Leviathan sighed, half vanishing into Nacht's body and resting her chest on top of the demiwyrm's head. "Why don't you make Satanachia do it? I would rather assure *your* protection, Mistress..."

"I'm not letting that damned pervert anywhere *near* my Aisha!" Nacht shot back.

Of the three devils Nacht could summon, Levi was the only one she could rely on to do the job correctly. The other two were far too twisted. If there was even the slightest chance that they would use excessive force, Aisha would never forgive her.

“Hmph! Well, I can’t deny that I *am* interested in this girl. My Mistress’s beloved...” Her dark eyes gleamed like a hunter’s at the thought.

“If you so much as *touch* Aisha, I *will* kill you. Understand?” There was weight behind Nacht’s words—a weight she usually held back when talking with others. But Levi could take it, so she spoke with every ounce of her will to dominate, dark mana accumulating on the palm of her hand as she issued her command. Nacht’s words, full of mana, stung like a sword.

“Jeez! There’s no need to make such a scary face, you know. I’m not nearly crazy enough to pick a fight with *you*, Mistress. But you know,” Levi added in a voice so gloomy it felt like it could crush someone’s heart, “this Aisha of yours that you love so much... I suppose I simply find myself in envy of her.” Nacht felt the devil’s breath as she sighed theatrically on her cheek.

Nacht waved her hand gloomily, dispersing the mana that had accumulated there. “In that case, get going. I’m not in the mood for chitchat today.”

“Are you too struck with envy, Mistress? I can relate.”

“Don’t make me order you again. Go.”

“As you command!” Levi said, her voice suddenly cheerful, and she vanished.

“Envy, huh...?” Nacht sighed again. She had lost track of how many sighs she had heaved today. Levi had given words to what was happening in Nacht’s heart. She was feeling envious of Aisha’s father. She was angry that even an illusion of her departed father had more sway over Aisha’s heart than Nacht, who was alive and with her.

“What have I done?” she cried. “I’m lower than the dregs of hell...”

Nacht felt well and truly sorry. But she didn’t intend to sit around regretting her actions. Everything Nacht had said was the truth. If Aisha was to be the servant of a Soul Dragon, she would not be permitted to cling to the past, imprisoned by what she’d lost. But Nacht thought—no, she *knew* that Aisha

would overcome this. She believed deep in her heart that Aisha would not be deceived by this doll. She only had one worry. “I really hope she doesn’t hate me now...”

The thought of being hated by Aisha made Nacht’s chest tense up painfully. What if Aisha were to push her away? Everything suddenly felt uncertain. At some point, Nacht had even forgotten to breathe—not that she needed to. “Don’t forget, Aisha,” Nacht said to herself. “You are my servant—the servant of a dragon.”

Suddenly, she heard a clamor from the surrounding area. She looked around and saw a throng of people looking up at her while she sat on the roof. Perhaps it was because this building was something like a church, but the entire crowd was made up of children.

“Look, sister! There’s a girl on the roof!”

“I can see her undies!”

“Who’s she, sister?”

There were a dozen or so of them looking up at Nacht. Much to her chagrin, it seemed that she had become a bit of a spectacle. Perhaps drawn by the commotion, an older girl of high school age—seemingly the most adultlike of the group—parted the crowd of children and looked up at Nacht. She wore a sword on her belt and was wearing lightweight but magically reinforced defensive gear.

“Stand back, everyone!” the older girl ordered. She seemed on guard and just a little bit afraid. “Who are you?” she said, addressing Nacht. “A thief? A ruffian? Or perhaps...a-an enemy? This church is under the watchful protection of the Holy Dragons! I-If you harm us, you will make an enemy of the Holy Church of the Ancient Dragons itself!”

Nacht was forced to amend her opinion on the girl almost immediately. Panicked like that, she seemed like the most childish of them all. Some of the children were protesting, saying that Nacht looked like a harmless lady and even that she was cute, but the older girl wasn’t listening.

“Hah,” Nacht laughed. “The gatekeeper thought I was a noble, but to you, I

look like a ruffian, I suppose.” It was rare for someone to have such an unfavorable first impression of Nacht. In a sense, that made the girl’s suspicion a mark of cunning, perhaps. But the girl, who seemed completely lost, quickly lowered her head.

“H-Huh? Wh-What? Y-You are of the nobility, my lady? P-Perhaps an acquaintance of His Highness The Prince? I-I beg your forgiveness!” It seemed the girl had come to yet another mistaken conclusion. She groveled desperately in apology. Apparently, she was the type to get worked up over nothing.

“I’m not a noble,” Nacht said. “I’m just a passing traveler—a completely normal, run-of-the-mill demiwurm. You can go ahead and call me your bestie Nacht!”

“What? A-A demiwurm?! I-I apologize for the offense, Miss Bestie Nacht! I am Tina, a priestess in the service of the exalted fire dragon. My full name is Tina Silzsard. Wh-What business has brought you to our humble church?”

Tina was a member of a church that revered dragons. Nacht declaring herself a demiwurm had therefore had an enormous effect on her disposition. She’d watched Nacht’s face carefully for her reaction as she spoke.

“No business of note,” said Nacht. “At least, not until I ran into you. There’s something strange about you, isn’t there? I can sense it.”

Tina tensed up. It was clear that she had some idea what Nacht was talking about. Nacht deftly leaped down from the roof and landed on the street, kicking up a plume of dust. She leaned up against the wall next to Tina. “Perhaps we can have a little chat...” Nacht said. But her eyes were keen. It didn’t seem like what she was after was anything like a friendly chat.

Tina took a step back, but that was as far as she got. Nacht’s hand shot out, holding the girl in place, and she grinned triumphantly. Nacht had found her mark.

Chapter 4: The Demon-Eyed Girl

Aisha walked along beside her father with faltering steps. She was starting to get tired of following along on her short legs. As she watched, she found herself staring at her father's back.

It was the same back of the same gentle man she remembered. He had a sword wound on his shoulder that still made for a nasty scar all these years later. Aisha remembered her father being ticklish if she ever touched his scar.

Aisha should have been enjoying this nostalgic walk, but somehow, her heart wasn't in it. She knew perfectly well what had cast this shadow over her—the person who was always by her side was no longer here. Aisha remembered her mistress sighing in disappointment as she left. She couldn't get the image of those cold eyes out of her mind.

I hope Mistress doesn't hate me now... she thought, clutching her chest tightly with her hand. It didn't make her feel even a little bit less dejected. Aisha lived for the sake of her mistress. If Nacht no longer needed her, what value did she even have? That question was eating away at her, causing no end to her anguish.

"Say, Aisha," said her father, speaking as Aisha remembered. "That girl earlier... Was she your friend?"

"No," said Aisha. "She's much, much more important to me than a friend." If Nacht were with them now, how happy would Aisha be? To have her warmhearted father walking in front and her benevolent mistress by her side. But Aisha shook her head, dismissing the fantasy.

No, that's not right, she thought. *Mistress said my father was a fake. I'm sure she's right like she always is, but she still gave me time to think it through properly...to see for myself.* That was why Aisha couldn't just let herself act like a child. As much as she would have loved to leap into his arms, nuzzle her head against him, smell his scent, hug him tight, and sob, she had to keep her wits about her. She wanted to cry out about how supremely sad she had been when

her father died—about how much trouble she had faced, how lonely she had been, how she had wanted to die herself. But how would her father, who was supposed to be dead, react to such words?

“She was cute!” her father said with a playful grin. “Maybe she’ll make good wife material when she’s a bit older!”

Aisha knew her father was kidding, but she was in no mood for jokes. “No, papa! Mistress is—”

“Ha ha ha!” her father laughed brightly. “Ah, but I have Floria, don’t I?! If I cheated on her, I’d never hear the end of it!”

Her father’s mouth twitched. Aisha could sense pain and bitterness behind his jokes. He must have been laughing so that Aisha wouldn’t notice. She had never noticed that growing up. But now, Aisha was paying close enough attention to her father to notice his sadness. The jovial expression suddenly seemed like an act.

“Aisha...” Aisha’s father began. “Do you hate your mother?” Aisha’s father had asked her that many times. Whenever he broached the subject, his usual confidence would vanish, leaving him anxious and uncertain.

And Aisha would always say, *“How would I know?! I don’t remember her, after all!”* In all honesty, she did hate her mother. But she could never bring herself to say those words to her father, of all people. So she would change the subject, saying, *“But I love you, papa! I love you the most in the whole world!”*

Aisha wasn’t ashamed. After all, it was true. Even when times were tough, Aisha was happy living with her father. Their house was drafty and full of holes, but cuddled up to her father, she slept nice and warm at night. Even carrying water and doing farmwork were fun as long as he was with her. Her father had given her lots and lots of support. She had been certain that she could never love anyone more than her father.

But that was all just a distant, fleeting memory. Now, she had someone she loved at least as much as her father, or perhaps even more. So this time, Aisha couldn’t keep silent. On some level, she felt like answering her father would be failing Nacht’s test. But she took a number of deep breaths and forced herself to speak through the fear.

“Um...” she said. “Papa... I actually came here looking for mother. It wasn’t my idea, exactly, but I decided I wanted to do it myself as well. You died back in the village, and Mistress Nacht saved my life. We’ve had all sorts of adventures. And now we’re here...?”

Aisha expected her father to deny those words, but that didn’t matter. She was here to find answers.

Her father stopped suddenly and cocked his head. “Hm?” he said. “What are you saying, Aisha? Your papa’s right here! But if you’ve come to think fondly of your mother, that makes me happy.” His words sounded strangely mismatched, like they had been copied from other things he’d said and strung together awkwardly. It was a strange response, as if he was not truly having a conversation with the girl in front of him.

“Papa!” Aisha exclaimed. Now that she had breached the dam, the words wouldn’t stop coming. “I’m happy I got to see you again! I never thought I would! I had...forgotten, you know? How you always look like you’re in so much pain! I hated being alone! I hated not having you there to protect me! Even when I thought I was going to die, I thought of you the whole time! So...I-I’m very happy to have met you like this!”

“What are you saying, Aisha?” her father answered.

Her body shaking, Aisha hugged her father tight. She looked like she was on the verge of tears. Tears of joy and sorrow both. “Papa, do you remember our little house in the village? It was full of holes, but it was where we were together. You remember it, right?” Aisha knew that the person in front of her was only a stranger adopting her father’s form and mannerisms. She had tried to deny her mistress’s words, but in the end, her mistress had been correct. Aisha had simply been dreaming. But why had someone done this? Why had they used her father’s form and voice? Aisha racked her brain but found herself unable to think of anything.

“Of course I do!” said her father, combing through words from the past to piece together statements. “You were always playing in the river and coming home late. I guess you must have been admiring the water, but you always made me worry when you were so late coming home...” He sighed as if he were

reliving his time together with his daughter.

“It was hard on you, wasn’t it, Aisha,” her father continued. “But...well, what brings this up now?”

That word, “now,” pierced Aisha’s heart. Her brain was struggling with the reality it was being presented with. She had never seen her father outside the village. It was unbearable to think that all the time she’d spent with him was in the past.

“Because you were so small and cute back then!” her father said. “How about we hold hands while we walk, just like we used to?” He held out his hand. Somehow, the gesture struck Aisha as ominous. His kind smile seemed twisted. So she ran, as fast as she could, away from her beloved father’s outstretched hand.

“H-Hey! Wait! Aisha!” her father called. But Aisha didn’t stop. She ran past the road to the special development zone and came to a network of smaller streets. She kept running, heedless to the world around her. She didn’t understand. This whole thing was beyond her comprehension. She’d left on a journey to find her mother, only to be reunited with her dead father. Her mistress had called him a fake and tried to kill him but was stopped, and now, she was gone. Aisha had seen for herself that he both was and wasn’t her father, and she, all by her lonesome, had run away.

She didn’t understand anything. She didn’t know what she should do or what she should believe. Her frantic thoughts were muddy like swamp water and running in circles. She didn’t have her father to support her. She didn’t have her mistress to pat her on the head. Nobody was by her side. She ran and ran until she was out of breath. Her throat hurt, but even so, she forced herself to keep running on unsteady legs, pressing on and on until she escaped the crowd and came to a place where she was alone.

Aisha passed through a back alley and came to an unused, disheveled open space, where she immediately collapsed. She looked up at the painfully blue sky with misty, tear-filled eyes. “*Sniffle...*” she wept. “Waaaah!” She wiped her eyes again and again, but her tears wouldn’t stop. The cries of anguish she had been holding back burst out of her.

She could do nothing but sob as she stared up at the sky, the agony of loneliness eating away at her chest. Eventually, she ran out of tears. The light stung her eyes, now red from crying, but even so, she kept wailing miserably.

Suddenly, Aisha heard a scraping sound, followed by the heavy thud of something slamming into the earth. Too miserable to stand up, she languidly turned her head toward the source of the sound. To her surprise, there was another person in the space at the end of the back alley.

“Are you sad...?” the newcomer said in a voice so weak and quiet that someone would have to strain themselves to hear it. But as small as her voice was, its clear tones carried her words into Aisha’s heart. Aisha’s face turned red from embarrassment at the thought that someone had heard her crying so loudly.

“Are you lonely...?” the strange girl asked. She had long bangs that partly covered her eyes. She seemed to be young—around the same age as Aisha. She was speaking cautiously, as if talking to people made her terribly anxious.

Aisha didn’t know what this girl’s intentions were in speaking to her, but before she knew it, she was sobbing out her feelings in a feeble voice.

“Everyone’s gone...” she said. “I’m all alone...”

“Then you’re like me...” the girl said. “I’m alone too...” A breeze blew, shaking the branches of the solitary nearby tree and tossing the girl’s hair to reveal her eyes, dark like the night sky and twinkling with stars.

“Pretty...” Aisha muttered, captivated by the stars in the girl’s eyes. They were so beautiful that Aisha had said it out loud before she knew what she was saying.



Aisha stared at the girl, her eyes clouded by tears. Slowly, she got to her feet as the wind continued to blow, playing in both girls' hair. She looked into the starry abyss of the girl's eyes, their points of light dancing aimlessly. And then, a second later, the girl's bangs fell back over her eyes like a cloud falling over the night sky. Aisha was almost sad to see them go.

The girl hung her head as if she expected Aisha to glare at her, hiding her eyes from view. Aisha calling them "pretty" made her squirm with embarrassment. Still keeping her eyes downcast, she turned sideways, quietly grabbing Aisha's shirt.

"Here... This way..." the girl said, tugging weakly. She lacked the strength to move Aisha's body, but she seemed like she might actually be friendly, so Aisha didn't resist. She allowed the girl to lead her wherever she liked.

The girl pulled Aisha along, not speaking a word. They took a few steps forward, to where the tree stood. It seemed to have absorbed all the nutrients from the surrounding soil; it was the only green thing growing in this desolate space. Attached to the tree's thickest branch was a small, misshapen swing hanging from a simple rope. It wasn't the prettiest thing in the world, but it felt real.

"Sit here..." the girl said. The swing looked like it might break under the weight of an adult, but Aisha's body was still small, much to her chagrin. She sat down, and the swing supported her weight.

The space they were in behind the back alley was shaded from direct sunlight but still mysteriously warm. Aisha felt the fierce whirlwind of emotions constricting her chest settling thanks to the simple knowledge that someone else was with her—that she was no longer all alone.

As Aisha struggled to calm herself, the girl broke the silence. "I've never done this before..." she said in an uncertain voice.

"Done what?" Aisha asked, nervous.

"Let someone else sit there..." the girl answered. "I'm always alone, you see..." She stood behind Aisha, not letting her see her face. When she continued speaking, her voice sounded sad, as if she was trying to sympathize

with the tearful Aisha. “Nobody comes here. I can sit alone...play alone...think alone...cry alone...search for answers. But you’re alone too. So I’ll let you sit here...”

The girl sounded pained. For a while, an atmosphere of quiet sadness fell over the area. But the girl was clearly doing her best to be friendly. She’d let Aisha into what was one of her special places despite them having only just met. When Aisha realized that, her heart didn’t feel quite so cold. Even if the girl was only doing this to be polite, it was quite the gesture.

I should say thank you... Aisha thought. She turned around to speak, but the girl tensed up and hastily looked away.

It struck Aisha that they didn’t know each other’s names. “U-Um, my name is Aisha,” she said, stammering out an introduction. Her voice was shaky and she didn’t particularly know what to say. “I’m a half-elf, you see, so even though I look like this, I’m actually nineteen. I’m just growing up slower than normal people. But I am an adult, I promise! U-Um...would you tell me your name?” Aisha was very conscious of how little she sounded like an adult. This girl had seen her crying her eyes out only moments ago. Ashamed that she had declared herself to be an adult in such a state, Aisha curled in on herself.

“I’m Izuna...” the girl said, giving only her name in contrast to Aisha’s rambling introduction. The conversation died and silence fell. Aisha was at a loss for what to do, but Izuna spoke up once more. “You’re not from this kingdom, are you?” she asked. It didn’t seem like a question.

“Weh! H-How did you know?”

“Because...you said my eyes were pretty...”

“What?! B-But they are! They’re sparkly and beautiful! They’re almost as pretty as my mistress Nacht’s eyes! It seems like such a waste to hide them like that!” Aisha couldn’t help blurting out more than she probably should have. But Izuna’s eyes were so beautiful that, having caught a glimpse, Aisha found herself wanting to see them more.

“You’re the only one who’s ever called them pretty...” Izuna replied, shaking her head. “These are Demon Eyes. They were given to me by the god of evolution. They have the power of misfortune. So you mustn’t look at me,

Aisha!” Aisha felt like that was a rather vague explanation, but Izuna would not wait for her to object. “Anyone who looks at me will find misfortune. Humans...plants...animals...all of them lose their mana and become sick. So you see, my eyes *aren’t* pretty. I mustn’t show them to anyone...”

Izuna sounded desperately, desperately lonely. She sounded like she was curled up somewhere impossibly cold, buried under ice or in the depths of the sea. More than compassion for the girl, Aisha felt real, bone-deep empathy. She knew what it was like to be alone in the world. She had felt just like that while wandering through the forest after her father’s death. And now that Nacht had left and she’d rejected her reunion with her father, she found herself all alone once more. She couldn’t help identifying with the girl’s words. But...

“But that’s such a shame!” Aisha said.

“A shame?”

“Yes! No matter what you say, it’s a shame to cover up such pretty eyes! I don’t really know what you mean by ‘Demon Eyes’ or ‘misfortune,’ but I saw your eyes and I’m fine! In fact, I want to see them more!”

Izuna gasped.

Aisha knew one thing for certain: nobody was truly all alone in the world. As long as a person lived, they were surrounded by others. One might delude themselves into thinking that they were alone, but only because their view of the world was too confined. It only took the slightest happenstance to trigger a meeting, be it coincidence, blessing, or misfortune. All it took was the courage to accept someone’s hand. That was what Aisha had learned, and what she wanted to teach Izuna.

Thinking that, Aisha felt even more foolish for how much she had been crying just moments earlier. She had let herself fall into the delusion that she was alone. Aisha placed her hand on her chest and felt the power deep within—the dark, boundless, yet warm mana that signified her bond with Nacht. She knew that her mistress believed in her and was waiting for her to find her conviction.

“Well...” Aisha said. “I’m alone right now. I know at least a little bit of how much it hurts. So...” She pressed her hand close to her chest, wishing to borrow courage from the people precious to her—courage that she could pass on to

others in turn. “So...would you like to be friends, maybe?”

Izuna flew into a panic at Aisha’s words. She stepped back in fear, staring angrily at Aisha through the gaps in her hair. “Wh-What are you saying?! I’m a holder of the Demon Eyes! I’m an abomination! Nobody is allowed near me! Anyone... Anyone who tries... They all die! Are you trying to deceive me?!”

“N-No!” protested Aisha. “I just thought you seemed nice, and I wanted to get to know you better! And maybe *humans* hate you for having Demon Eyes, but I’m a half-elf, you know!”

“Huh?” Izuna cocked her head. She didn’t know and thus didn’t understand, but Aisha saw herself in the girl. It was obvious to her now that they had been speaking past each other.

“I was raised in a village in Sindoria,” Aisha said. “I’m not really a proper human, and I’m not a proper elf either. I forget things easily. I oversleep a lot. I wasn’t useful to anyone no matter how much I tried to be. People called me a waste of food. They hated me. Nobody wanted to be my friend.”

“That’s not—” Izuna began. But Aisha cut her off, smiling at her hasty denial.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m not the same as you. But I would like to be your friend.” Aisha held out her hand. Timidly, Izuna reached out with her smaller hand. They drew closer until their fingers touched. And then, Aisha took the last step forward, taking Izuna’s hand in hers. “It’s nice to meet you, Izuna.”

“Uh-huh...” Izuna said, looking up bashfully from under her bangs. The moment their hands met, the space transformed from one of solitude to one that the two of them shared. “So...” Izuna ventured. “What were you doing here crying, Aisha...?”

“O-Oh... You heard that...?” Aisha felt deeply embarrassed. “Well...” she said, and explained the whole situation.

“Oh...” Izuna said. “That sounds difficult...” The swing creaked, punctuating the silence. “But weren’t you happy to meet your father again?”

“I was. *Very* happy. But it was wrong...”

“He was different from how you remembered him?”

“No,” said Aisha. “He acted the same, smelled the same, talked the same... He really did seem like the papa I knew. But...something was wrong.” She thought she had figured out the source of her unease. “It was like he wasn’t seeing the present me.”

A heavy silence fell over the area.

“I’m sorry,” Aisha said. “I’ve just been talking about myself. Why are you here, Izuna?”

“This is where I belong...” said Izuna. “It’s my only real home...”

Silence fell again. The whole conversation felt awkward.

What do I say...? Aisha thought. She had never been good at speaking to people. She sat there in the thick silence, desperately envious of Nacht’s communication skills. *Should I ask...?*

The reason Izuna was out here alone. Aisha was anxious about broaching the subject of Izuna’s past and body. It was their first time meeting, after all. It seemed like it could be rude. But when she saw how small and nervous Izuna was, she couldn’t help asking. “So...Izuna...you have Demon Eyes?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Um...I don’t really know what that means, you know. Is it really so terrible?”

“They’re the Demon Eyes of Exorcism. It’s a power that Eupito, the god of evolution, granted to the house of Greenfield. They absorb mana and destroy magic...”

The story began a thousand years ago, after the Holy Land had claimed victory in the Great War of Man and Demon. Human domination spread throughout the land. At the time, Estoll was a nation of many species, and as such, they rejected the teachings of the Order of the Elect and fought against the rule of the Holy Land along with a number of other nations. The flames of war spread to Gelariau Forest itself, spilling the blood of many.

Estoll had always been a land rich in metal and thus home to many blacksmiths, but its magic was less developed than that of other lands. Enemy magic users were a constant problem for Estoll’s soldiers. In one battle, when

the opposing army's magic flames had consumed all, there had been a single survivor: a man who had the eyes of the god of evolution's Demon Eyes of Exorcism, which vanquished magic.

The man was a great champion in the war—a veritable grim reaper. He would absorb the power of friend and foe without discrimination and use it to strike down entire armies, earning many victories for Estoll. That was Greenfield the Annihilator, Izuna's ancestor.

"Most people know about it and take care not to look..." Izuna said in a feeble, pained voice. "But children and people without much magic sometimes collapse with just a glance. These eyes are a curse. They give great power at a greater cost. Do you still want to be friends now that you know that, Aisha?" She sounded anxious, like she was worried that the bond she had made would vanish the moment she opened up about herself.

Aisha knew how hard it must have been for Izuna to say those words. She stood up and brushed Izuna's bangs away from her eyes.

"A-Aisha!" Izuna protested. "No!" But Aisha ignored her, peering straight into her eyes.

"It's all right. I'm all right, Izuna. Maybe I'm just dense, but your eyes don't feel like they're hurting me in the slightest." Aisha petted Izuna's hair just like the people who cared for her had done so many times before. She tried to imagine what her mistress would say at a time like this. She figured it might be something like this: "In fact, I feel lucky to have seen something so pretty. You don't need to hide your eyes from me, Izuna."

Izuna unconsciously absorbed mana through her eyes. It was true that they made her a threat, but Aisha at least seemed to be unaffected.

Aisha remembered what her mistress had taught her about magic. *"If you imagine the mana in your body as water, using magic is like turning on a faucet. Most people have about a cupful, but your mana is like an entire bathtub's worth. And if you add in the power of the dragon, that would make it a small lake. So it stands to reason that the faucet is hard to control!"* Aisha had a lot of mana. She might have had trouble using magic, but in terms of raw power, she was quite incredible. Even looking directly into Izuna's eyes, her magic was

being drained at a speed barely above that of a trickle. She didn't mind having a bit of her mana absorbed at all.

"Doesn't it...hurt?" Izuna asked.

"Not at all! I'm absolutely fine!"

"But! But!"

"I'm fine! Actually, I'm glad we're so compatible! Anyway, I'm an adult, you know. I'm happy to help look after you a bit. I can handle your eyes, so you don't have to worry."

"A-Aishaaa!" Izuna sobbed.

"Ha ha. What a sweet little girl." Aisha pulled Izuna into her arms—her first-ever friend. She felt herself calming down.

"Cut it out!"

"Weh?! Cut what out?"

"S-Stop acting like you're my big sister! Stop being so nice to me!"

"I *will* be your big sister if you'd like!" said Aisha.

"Big words for someone who was just crying like a baby..."

"Don't say that!" Aisha said, giggling. Somehow, she couldn't stop herself. Izuna joined in, and the two shared a cheerful laugh.

"Aisha," said Izuna. "Don't you want to see your father?"

"Weh? I-I do...but..."

"You can! If you believe and make a wish, you can see him again!"

"But...that's..."

"I mean it," Izuna said. "When you're alone, think about what your father would be doing. Remember him, and wish from the bottom of your heart. If you do that, you will meet him again." Izuna seemed convinced of her words.

As the sun set, Izuna jumped off the swing and began walking off alone. "Aisha..." she said. "Will you come here again tomorrow?" She held out her pinkie finger. "Promise?"

“Yes, I promise!” said Aisha. The two girls entwined their pinkie fingers under the light of the setting sun.

‡

The church with the dragon emblem was a gathering place for the oldest faith in the world—the Holy Church of the Ancient Dragons. The relief on this particular church was red, symbolizing the fire dragon. The last time Nacht had encountered said fire dragon, it had made such a bad impression that she had seriously considered killing it. In fact, she was still of the mind that she hadn’t punished the dragon nearly enough for laying its claws on Aisha. In retrospect, Nacht wondered if perhaps it was his draconic presence within the church that had unknowingly drawn her to this spot.

That being said, Nacht certainly had no intention of taking her unfavorable impression of the fire dragon out on the girl in front of her. The fire dragon and Tina the priestess were different people, after all.

“Well, then. Ready for our chat, Tina?” Nacht asked with a smile.

“Y-Yes,” she said. “Please ask me whatever you wish. It’s the least I can do to make up for my terrible rudeness earlier.”

She must have been referring to how she’d pointed her sword at Nacht when she was up on the roof. Nacht, however, found herself taking an interest in this girl, who had so fiercely pointed a sword at her. After all, when most people met her, they couldn’t see past her beautiful character design. It was rare for someone to come away with such an unfriendly impression of her.

Nacht slowly looked Tina over. The first thing that stood out was her unruly head of hair. She even had a lock sticking up that seemed to quiver when she was tense, reflecting her emotions. She called herself a priestess, but she wasn’t wearing anything that looked like holy attire. Nacht deducted a few points for that. Rather than a priestess, she looked like a light-armored sword fighter, with a red-bladed longsword sheathed on her belt.

“Don’t worry about it!” Nacht said. “What’s important is that you seem like a pleasant enough person to be around.” Nacht eyed Tina up and down, making the girl tense up even further—to the point that beads of sweat started forming on her forehead. Nacht’s golden-ringed eyes could see through to the depths of

a person's heart, and right now, they were searching every last inch of Tina's body. Eventually, they stopped, fixating on Tina's sizable chest. Tina squirmed bashfully and did her best to hide her breasts from view.

"You're not entirely human, are you?" Nacht asked. "I can sense a faint draconic presence in you. And it's subtle, but you have the same smell as the dolls infesting this city." She took a step forward, closing the distance between herself and Tina. They were close enough now to feel each other's breath on their skin. Nacht reached out, trying to find the source of the presence she felt.

"Nh!" Tina reflexively reached for her sword, but Nacht grabbed her hand as it touched the hilt, preventing her from drawing. "What?!" Nacht ignored her expression of surprise and, using her free hand, touched the girl right below her chest. "What are you...?"

Nacht could feel something cold beneath Tina's smooth skin. Something metallic buried under her warm human flesh. Nacht felt it beat with a heart's rhythm. "Who gave you this heart?" she asked.

Tina gasped, her eyes darting every which way. "H-How did you...?!"

Nacht removed her hand from the girl's chest and sat down on a nearby sofa, crossing her legs. "I told you," she said. "You smell just like those dolls I keep seeing around the city. I was hardly going to fail to notice something so similar when it was right under my nose."

Tina's heart had the same presence to it as the dolls. Nacht was sure that the same person must have created both. At first, Nacht had wondered if Tina was a mere tool of the people who had deceived Aisha, but the girl's behavior had led her to dismiss that hypothesis. It had been a bit of an overreaction, but her having moved to protect the children from Nacht seemed to demonstrate that she was a human with free will.

"Is someone threatening you?" Nacht asked. "Did you lose your heart in a fight? Well, either way, if the same person put that heart in you, it means you must know the ne'er-do-well who deceived my Aisha."

"Are you an enemy of the demons, then?" Tina asked. "But why would an exalted demiwyrm...?"

Nacht shook her head as she mulled over the new bit of information Tina had just given her. “I just happened to be in the area,” she said with a wink. “I was hoping to get an explanation from you since you seem to know something about what’s going on here. I told you, didn’t I? I want to chat.”

“And you, the exalted demiwyrm Nacht, would be our ally? And the enemy of the demons?”

Nacht laughed at the question. “If I said yes, would you believe me?”

“I-I just meant—”

“I’m not anyone’s ally or enemy. But you look like you’re in a bit of trouble, you know? Why don’t you try talking to me? I might be able to be a bit of an ally to you after all, Tina.” Nacht smiled kindly, but Tina recoiled and backed away, shaking.

“This is what becomes of humans who make deals with devils,” she said. It seemed terribly unfair, Nacht thought, to put a beautiful young lady like herself in the same category as the likes of Levi. Tina clutched the hilt of her blade. “It began a few years back, I believe,” she said, her voice full of regret. “Or at least, that’s when the rumors started. I’m sure that by that time, that demon woman was already in control of this kingdom.”

‡

It began with the king’s announcement: “My wife has returned from the dead!”

But in truth, there was someone else in Estoll Castle who was said to be far closer to a king than that man was. The woman in question had so quickly earned so much authority through her aggressive politicking that some even speculated that the king was on the verge of abdicating the throne. She was the noble daughter of House Rainfiel, a family that had long served as civic officials for the kingdom of Estoll. She was a young genius who had secured the position of chief court wizard through nothing more than her own innate magic talent. And soon, that talent had earned her the post of prime minister. Her name was Analissia Rainfiel.

It was around that time that Analissia had bought out the city’s slums and

turned them into the special development zone. The special development zone was officially created to bring relief to the poor and stimulate the economy. The Order of the Elect, who had previously been responsible for the welfare of the city's poor, put up some resistance and had needed to be strong-armed to the extent that half of their members were banished from the city, but by now, people simply took their existence as a matter of fact.

There were all sorts of rumors surrounding the special development zone back then. They said that the dead there walked among the living. That Estoll had developed an elixir that returned the dead to life. That it was a place where one could reunite with lost loved ones. Whispers of the secret arts that had returned the king's wife to the living spread all over the city.

At the time, Tina had thought that they were no more than rumors—the drunken ramblings of traveling bards, after all, could fan the flames of even the most outrageous tale. But the rumors spread further and further each day, from villagers to merchants, and in the end, even the nobility was asking questions about the special development zone.

And yet, the zone's construction proceeded without incident. After all, it had brought prosperity to Estoll and enriched the common folk. A few dark rumors could be simply laughed off. And Estoll prospered with a puppet king on its throne.

The problems had started when Estoll began formally considering a declaration of war on the kingdom of Sindoria. It had been one thing to turn a blind eye to Analissia's political manipulations when it had benefited the people, but this was another thing entirely. It was a war that promised no chance of victory. A one-sided declaration that would make the Holy Land Estoll's enemy as well. It was an eventuality that had to be avoided at all costs. Many of Tina's coreligionists, who had been brought up alongside her in the Holy Church of the Ancient Dragons, were enlisted in Estoll's military. The last thing Tina wanted was to see them sent off to a senseless, futile war.

One day, William, the crown prince of Estoll, came to Tina with a request. "I suspect that Prime Minister Analissia Rainfiel may in fact be a loathsome demon. I realize what a shameful thing I am asking you to do, Tina, priestess of the fire dragon, but I need your strength to defeat that woman."

Tina attacked in the dead of night. She'd watched carefully and struck at a time when Analissia's two greatest allies, the girl with the Demon Eyes and the current chief court wizard, were away. But when she drew close, she found her mark ready.

"There you are," Analissia said. "I've been waiting, you know." Tina hadn't spoken a word about the plan to anyone other than the prince, but somehow, Analissia knew everything. She had laid in wait and led Tina into a trap.

But Tina was a stronger fighter than Analissia had expected. She crushed the dolls sent after her and cut down the assassins. In the end, Analissia was forced to use the power of a demon. A pair of bat-like wings appeared on her back, her eyes turned red, and her alluring, voluptuous body sprouted an inhuman tail. If Tina had doubted William's words, she now had proof.

They clashed swords, but something was wrong. Without warning, the power of the fire dragon in Tina's body simply abandoned her. "No!"

And so, Tina found herself effortlessly defeated by the demon she had come to slay.

‡

Nacht froze up when she heard the story of Tina's duel with Analissia. It wasn't long ago that she'd beaten the fire dragon within an inch of its life for daring to hurt Aisha. It occurred to her that a dragon on the verge of death might not have had the spare power needed to extend its blessing to Tina. *Was that my fault too?* she wondered. The timing simply seemed too terrible to be believed.

"Miss Nacht? Is something wrong?"

"Ha ha!" Nacht laughed stiffly. "Never you mind that!" She coughed, hoping she had successfully deceived Tina. Tina gave her a suspicious look. "But that's quite the wild plan, storming in all by yourself like that. You must be quite brave, Tina."

"I-I wouldn't say I'm particularly brave," Tina said. "I am the priestess of the fire dragon. In terms of strength in battle, at least, I am confident that I'm the strongest in all of Estoll. And even if I were to lose, I don't usually have to worry

about my opponent killing me.”

Tina held the blessing of the fire dragon. To slay her would be to make an enemy of the fire dragon itself. Moreover, many worshiped her as the priestess who could hear the words of the dragon. Were the fire dragon’s new priestess to suddenly die, the Holy Church of the Ancient Dragons was sure to launch an investigation. If they did, it would only be a matter of time before the prime minister’s true, demonic identity came to light.

“I would have liked to have the support of the Church in that attack, to be honest,” Tina said. “But I only became a priestess recently, and on top of that, I had insisted on returning to Estoll. And besides, there was no time before the war was to start. I suppose I had no options other than to fight alone.”

“So in other words, you don’t have any friends.”

“N-No!” Tina protested. “I simply didn’t have anyone I could trust as a partner!”

“Sorry, that was rude,” Nacht apologized. “Well, now you can count on me. For a little while, anyway.”

“That...doesn’t make me feel much better, somehow...” Tina said, slumping her shoulders. “I believe I may have overestimated my abilities. I neglected to think that, without the exalted fire dragon’s power, I am nothing more than a frail adventurer.”

Tina was an orphan raised by the Holy Church of the Ancient Dragons. It was an upbringing that didn’t afford much personal freedom, and from a young age, Tina had decided that she wanted to become an adventurer in order to ensure that she and the other children would always have enough food to fill their stomachs. But in a twist of fate, she had happened to encounter an injured dragon near the Leegh mountain range. The dragon was a strange being that spoke like a child. Apparently, its older sister had been chastising it for something, which was why it was in such a sorry state. It seemed like a much more foolish being than the dragons Tina had heard of in fairy tales. The dragon glared at her, and as Tina began to fall to her knees to beg for her life, it ordered her to render it assistance.

Tina had used all the skills she’d learned as an adventurer to give aid to the

dragon. She had also brought it food and water. In the end, she and the dragon had spent seven whole days together. During that time, the dragon had taken a liking to her and decided on a whim to grant her its blessing.

A Dragon Priestess was capable of incredible feats of strength. They symbolized the power of the church. It was their role to slay monsters that were deemed threats. So when Prince William had asked her to exterminate a demon, Tina was inclined to take the fight head-on. It didn't at all go against the will of the church for her to accept the request.

"Without the power of the exalted fire dragon, I was defeated," Tina said. "She killed me and gave me this heart. A Marionette Heart, I believe she called it. It gives me life, but it's also inflicted with a powerful curse of domination. In practice, it isn't too different from being dead."

"For all that, you don't sound too torn up about it," Nacht deadpanned.

"Ah ha ha..." Tina laughed, putting on a brave face. "I was already bound to the exalted fire dragon, you know. It seems like the curse of domination didn't affect me. I was able to find an opportunity to escape, and now, I'm trying to think of a way to resist that woman. If only I could send word of the demon to the priestess of the water dragon, I'm sure we could defeat her. But I would need to show proof that I'm alive, and I can't do that..."

Tina seemed extremely wary, like she was expecting assassins to show up at any time. "Prime Minister Analissia is searching for me," she explained, her voice resolute in the face of fear. "She hasn't stopped my heart yet, but I don't know how long she will refrain. So, Miss Nacht, that's why I must ask..." She bowed deep, desperately entreating the demiwyrm. "If you were guided to this city by your ties to the dragons, we are truly blessed. If you have the strength to face the demon and strike her down, would you please destroy her in my stead?"

"Are you sure?" Nacht said. "That'll kill you too, won't it?"

If the spellcaster were to die, the dolls in the city and Tina's heart would stop functioning as well. A tremble ran through Tina's body, but she looked up at Nacht with conviction in her eyes. "I am the priestess of the fire dragon. It is my duty to forestall disaster. But to be honest, I don't particularly care for the

position. The only thing I ever wanted was for everyone to have plenty of food to eat. To me, that was happiness. But as long as I'm here, I am placing everyone's lives in danger. I'm their older sister. I have a responsibility to protect the younger children. Besides, if the prime minister ever asks me for something in exchange for my life, I intend to refuse on the spot. I would rather die than assist her. What difference does it make if it happens now or later?"

Tina's eyes were full of determination, but she was clearly putting on a brave face. She was clenching her teeth to keep them from rattling as if bracing herself for certain death. "Exalted demiwyrm Nacht," she said. "I beg you, please exterminate this demon!"

There was no doubt as to what Nacht's answer would be. She nodded once, acknowledging Tina's grave words. "Sorry, but no," she said.

"Thank y— Excuse me?! Weren't you nodding along just now?! I thought for sure you'd say yes!"

"Look, I'm just trying to figure out what's going on in this city. I've got a bone to pick with her for tricking Aisha, but her being a demon has nothing to do with it." Nacht had given Aisha until she got to the bottom of the mystery to think. It would be boorish of her to bust into the demon's stronghold and beat her up right off the bat. She had to use this time to think as well. That way, she and Aisha could confront the issue together.

"What?!" Tina protested. "But if you defeat the prime minister, surely all of the unnatural happenings in this city will be resolved!"

As far as Nacht was concerned, though, that was someone else's problem. The only thing that mattered to her was Aisha. Still, she was charmed by Tina's sincerity and polite request for aid. She didn't want to refuse to help flat out. Plus, this was potentially an opportunity to mend her relationship with the fire dragon.

"And you would die, then, I suppose?" Nacht replied.

"Gh..."

"If you're going to ask me for a wish, at least make it something fun. Something greedy or heartwarming. I don't feel like granting you death."

“No!” Tina wailed, pain creeping into her voice as looked up at Nacht. “No! I don’t want to die! I’m afraid of death! I’m only sixteen, but I’ve never had the time to fall in love! And I’ve finally managed to earn a bit of money, but I haven’t eaten half of the things I want to eat! But... But what else can I do?! I can’t protect them like this! Protecting them was all I ever wanted...” Tina clutched her sword, cursing her own weakness.

Just then, there came a knock on the door, interrupting the heavy silence. Nacht scowled, not concealing her displeasure in the slightest.

“Um, I’m sorry!” Tina said. “We’re in the middle of something right now, if you could perhaps come back later.”

Whoever was at the door wasn’t listening, though. It opened, and three figures stepped inside. They were not humans, but dolls in the shape of humans. It was Nacht, not Tina, who seemed angriest at the intrusion. “How dare you mock my companions?!” she growled. After all, the pair of catgirls that had stepped inside—one black and one white—had the forms of Nacht’s old friends, with whom she had faced many battles.

The third intruder was a man Nacht didn’t recognize. He was small like a child and wearing clothes that were plainly too big for him. “What nonsense,” he said. “We haven’t done anything at all. I suppose this is your lingering attachment, then? It’s your own fault for clinging to the past, you know. Don’t blame us.” Something about his voice made Nacht’s skin crawl. He smiled smugly, looking over Tina with undisguised sadistic glee. “But be that as it may, we are here to collect you, Madam Priestess.”

“Gyria...” Tina said, her eyes narrowing to a scowl. “What are you doing here?” It seemed plain that this Gyria had nothing but bad intentions.

“Now, what have I done to earn such an evil look?” Gyria said, doing a poor imitation of kindness. “We’re comrades, aren’t we? After all, we share the pleasure of serving—or rather, being used by—the same master. I am a herald of the prime minister, you know. Why shouldn’t I enter whenever I please?”

“Says who?!” Tina demanded. Nacht could sense no soul in the man, but she didn’t need her abilities to see that he was not human. Both his voice and his mannerisms were strange and unnatural.

Gyria laughed. “Goodness, we seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot! We both have the same device in our chest, you know. You were quite beautiful when you were covered in blood, little Tina! Kee hee hee hee hee!” It seemed he had been watching Tina’s operation when it happened. “How long are you going to stay here alone? You must choose your friends, Tina.”

“You are no friends of mine!” Tina shot back. “And I’m not alone!”

“You wound me! Well, I suppose I can forgive you. I haven’t introduced myself, after all!” Gyria said, his body contorting unnaturally. His smile twisted into a creepy half-moon grin as he spoke without moving his mouth. “My name is Gyria. I’m a professional killer. My specialty is assassinations, and my hobby is murder. My favorite thing in the world is the sight of fresh blood. If there’s anyone you would like killed, please don’t hesitate to ask!”

He was incredible, in a way. An embodiment of the darkness of humanity.

“Hm,” Nacht said. “I’m Nacht, a Soul Dragon demiwurm. But you can call me the great and terrible Lady Nacht.”

“Don’t introduce yourself to them!” said Tina. “They’re enemies! Tools of the prime minister!”

“Manners are important, Tina. Besides, we could all afford to calm down a bit.” Nacht was externally calm, but inside, she was seething with anger. Her anger wasn’t directed at Gyria, though, but at the two dolls standing behind him. Every glimpse she caught of them brought her closer to giving in to her rage.

“Heya, bestie! Long time no see!” the white catgirl greeted her. The black catgirl bowed politely.

The two were nearly identical in face, voice, and mannerisms. They had been twin sisters in real life as well. It seemed they hadn’t planned on making their characters identical aside from the color, but both had chosen to play beastmen with cat ears and made their characters the same height. The only difference was the color of their fur. It was a really astonishing coincidence.

Despite her appearance, the black cat, Kurone, acted like a proper adult. In contrast, the white cat, Shirone, acted exactly like one might expect of an

exuberant catgirl. Nacht would often play at batting their ears and tails. It was a truly soothing activity.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!” Gyria laughed, taunting Nacht mercilessly for her emotions. “What’s this? A tearful reunion? I suppose it was worth bringing those toys along as escorts, then! Well, why not?! I won’t interfere, so play with them all you like! Little Tina here’s the only one I want.”

Nacht glanced at the pair of dolls as they ran up to her, crowding her from either side. It seemed like the dolls with personalities weren’t under particularly fine control if they would abandon Gyria to come up to Nacht.

For her part, Nacht was grateful for Gyria’s consideration. Her patience, after all, was nearly at its limit. “Oh, really?” she said. “All right, then. I’ll take you up on that offer. Let’s have some fun...”

The words had hardly left Nacht’s mouth before she activated one of her skills, increasing her speed. That alone was enough to send out a powerful blast of sound, striking Tina and Gyria on their faces and knocking them off-balance.

“Eek!” Tina cried.

“Gah!” exclaimed Gyria.

They blinked, and when they opened their eyes, they saw two heads flying through the air. Threads of brilliant red light trailed from the dolls’ severed necks to Nacht’s hands. “*Dragon Technique: Red Dragon Claw!*”

The dolls didn’t spurt blood or anything of the sort as they seemingly returned to their original, inanimate states. Their bodies now looked like nothing more than artificial mannequins, which Nacht burned with magic fire until nothing remained. It was as if the dolls had never been there in the first place.

“Well, they sure broke easily,” Nacht said. It didn’t seem like the dolls had been created with much in the way of power. Their heads had separated from their bodies with no resistance at all.

“What?!” Tina and Gyria both exclaimed at once as what had happened slowly dawned on them.

“I’m surprised...” said Gyria, trembling at Nacht’s display of rage. “Weren’t

those girls your friends?”

Nacht, however, could only take those words as an insult. “My friends?” she said. “Don’t be absurd! If those were my friends, they could easily have stopped an attack from the likes of *me*!”

Kurone’s class was Kaiser Monk. She was widely known as an absolute beast in close-quarter combat. If Nacht, a magic specialist, had ever done something as idiotic as launching a melee attack at her, she would have simply been sent flying by one of Kurone’s famous counters.

Shirone was a similar matter. She was a support character, unlike her sister, but she was still a max-level character. If it had really been her, she could have stopped Nacht’s attack one-handed. She would have treated it like a joke, playing around the way a cat would.

“If that had really been Kurone,” Nacht said, “she would’ve just said something like, ‘Are you trying to fight me?’ But I suppose the likes of you aren’t sturdy enough for me to play with.” Nacht gave Gyria a look of sheer contempt and condescension.

“Hah,” Gyria replied, glaring back at her. “Yes, yes, you’re very strong. But let your guard down and you’ll die!” It should have been obvious how much stronger Nacht was than Gyria. And yet, foolishly, he moved to attack, sending a tiny poison-tipped needle flying from where it had been concealed in the hem of his clothes.

Nacht plucked the needle out of the air with her thumb and index finger. “Are you finished?” she asked.

Gyria didn’t answer. He contorted his whole body, lashing out with yet more deadly assassination weapons—a blade from his foot, a knife from his sleeve, a needle built into his belt, and short blades strapped to his back. They came from every direction at once, like a deadly rain. And just as a human cannot dodge the rain, there would be no avoiding this attack. “Hee hee hee hee hee! Die! Die! Die to death! Red! Red! Reeeeed!”

“Nacht!” Tina cried. The deadly metal blades flew faster than Tina could follow. They filled the air like clouds as they descended upon Nacht.

“Eh...?” Gyria couldn’t believe his eyes. Even after that entire volley, Nacht was standing there like nothing had happened. She was perfectly composed. The blades were sticking out of the floor all around her, each perfectly vertical and lined up as if they had been placed there with deliberate care, but not one had hit its mark. Nacht was unharmed. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What?! How did you do that?!”

Nacht didn’t think she had done anything *that* astonishing. All she’d done was catch the thrown weapons as they came close and neatly, carefully stab them into the ground one at a time. She smiled, proud of her handiwork. “You done?” she asked.

“Gh!” Gyria exclaimed. It was obvious that Nacht thought very little of his attacks. It hardly seemed like a battle at all.

Nacht remembered what her friend Krista had said—that if she got involved with the war, it wouldn’t be a war at all. Nacht would simply overpower all. Under the current circumstances, that seemed like something worth keeping in mind. The thought slotted into place in her mind, like one gear turning another. It made this whole thing feel somewhat pointless.

Nacht took a step forward. “Kyee!” Gyria cried. “S-Stay back! Stop! If I die, Tina dies as well! If I don’t return to my master, she’ll assume that Tina is still being rebellious!” He turned to face Tina. “And then, your life will be forfeit! Staying in the church won’t protect you, you know! The only way for you to live is to submit! Submit as I have!”

Nacht stopped in her tracks.

“G-Good...” Gyria said. “Now, Tina, you have two choices: submit or die! But in my honest opinion, submission would be much better for you, you little thing.”

With Nacht no longer advancing, the wretched man seemed to have regained some of his confidence. But Gyria was Tina’s guest, after all. Nacht figured she should at least let him say his piece. Besides, Tina’s determination was the very thing that had endeared her to Nacht.

“You don’t need to be so miserable about it,” Gyria went on. “That woman is a genius, you know! A far more talented monarch than a certain king I could

name. Just look at how well she uses me! Under her, my talents have only grown to even greater heights! She's fond of us, in her own way. As long as we remain useful to her, she allows us to do as we please. Not as much freedom as she gives the Demon Eyes girl, though, mind you."

"What is that supposed to mean?!" Tina demanded.

"Just that it's quite enjoyable, working for her. Or should I say, she will *make* you enjoy it. My sense of self survived the destruction of my individuality, you know, and the work she gives me allows my talents to truly flourish. Can you not see how splendidly she uses me? Would you not like to be used as well? Now, give me your answer."

Tina didn't hesitate. Just as Nacht had surmised, she had already made up her mind. Her answer was a slash of her sword. The long, red blade flowed out of its sheath like water, accelerating into a draw cut. Nacht's senses were sharp enough to follow the fast, beautiful movements of Tina's swordsmanship.

Gyria's outstretched hand fell to the floor with a plop. A second later, the stump began theatrically spurting out fresh blood.

"Gwaaah!!!" Gyria cried. "Youuu! How dare you, how dare you, how dare you, how dare you, *how dare you?! My precious right aaaaarm!*"

"You're upset about a single arm?" Tina said. "After all the people you've killed? All the people you've hurt? Know their pain, then die!"

"Don't... Don't you look down on me!!!" Gyria fought back against Tina's flowing sword technique with an array of hidden weapons. But Gyria was an ambush specialist. The fight's outcome had been determined the moment he'd allowed himself to be the one taken off guard.

As Gyria fled for dear life, Nacht's attention was elsewhere. She was thinking about the dolls she had seen that were created to be vessels and the humans who had merely had hearts implanted inside them. The difference between those two things was likely her first important clue.

"Agh! Bwuh! Gah!" Gyria wailed. "S-Stop! Y-You'll die if you do this, you know! You'll die, you hear me?!" Behind Gyria's confidence, it seemed, was a sniveling coward. He took life because he valued his own above all else. But

Tina sliced him apart without hesitation. First his fingers, followed by his chest, then his legs.

“You like the sight of blood, but you can’t stand to be bloodied yourself?” Tina said. “That’s quite presumptuous. I believe I hate you.”

“Stop! Stoooooop! I-I’m meant to be doing the killing! The one painting in blood...” He collapsed onto the floor, mumbling incoherently to himself.

“Personally, I find it quite refreshing to think that I’ll never see you again in this world.” Tina’s sword burned red like the fire dragon’s breath as she cut Gyria to pieces. “Ah ha ha ha ha...” she laughed when it was over. “And now, I’m good as dead.” She sounded oddly happy about the prospect.

“Mm,” Nacht agreed, nonplussed. “But more importantly, Tina...”

“‘More importantly’?!” Tina shot back. “I wish you would try to think of things from my perspective sometimes, Nacht.”

Nacht smiled indulgently. It was Tina’s defiant temper that had endeared her to her in the first place, after all. “More importantly,” she went on, “have you thought of a wish?”

“What? You’re bringing it back to wishes as though nothing happened?” Tina frowned, uncertain. “To be honest, there’s so much going on that I hardly know what to think...”

“You don’t have to think,” Nacht said. “It’s just a wish, after all.”

Tina had no way of understanding Nacht’s true intentions, but she answered all the same. “Um...well...I suppose to defeat the demon and protect everyone at the orphanage?”

“And that’s all?” Nacht asked, an expression of plain boredom on her face.

“N-No! Let me think...” Tina began. “Well...there’s all the poor children who’ve been sent off to war. Perhaps...you could stop the war from happening?” She spoke wistfully, like she was talking about a far-off dream.

“Uh-huh. Nothing else?”

“Wh-What are you getting at, you fiend?! F-Fine, then! Please save me too, while you’re at it!”

Nacht grinned and took a step toward Tina.

“H-Hey! What are—”

And then, her hand pierced the girl’s heart.

‡

Izuna paced in the gardens of Analissia’s manor, seemingly unable to rest. Flowers shone in the light of the moons overhead. It was a sight truly worthy of the word “extravagant.”

“My, my, Izuna,” Analissia said, approaching her. “Did something happen? You seem to be in rather high spirits.”

“Yes...” Izuna said quietly, smiling happily as she spoke. “I made a friend...”

“A friend? Tell me about them.”

“Her name’s Aisha... She’s a half-elf... A young girl...”

“Well, isn’t that lovely,” said Analissia. “You must introduce me to her. I would love to meet this friend of yours.”

“Okay!” Izuna nodded.

When Analissia returned to her chambers, however, her tone turned to one of clear displeasure. “A friend?!” she spat. “*That* Izuna made a *friend*?!”

Who in the world could it possibly be? At the very least, certainly nobody from Estoll. Izuna Lendoll Greenfield was the last survivor of the lineage cursed with the Demon Eyes—a weapon of war. Her evil reputation was sure to precede her wherever she went within the kingdom. Not only that, but Analissia herself had forbidden anyone to associate with Izuna. It was impossible to think that a local would have broken the prohibition now, of all times.

“Trouble follows trouble, I suppose...” she sighed. Between the escape of the fire dragon priestess and the disappearance of their Sleeping Beauty, all sorts of unforeseen events had been taking place. It was really starting to weigh on her. Beyond those issues, Gyria, whom she had sent to recover Tina, had failed to return, and the heart she had given the girl had somehow been destroyed. It was easy to see that things had gone far off plan.

Nonetheless, Analissia's project to take over Estoll, at least, was going well. The organs of the state were completely under her control, and she was hard at work molding the kingdom to her liking. Things had been getting downright comfortable. If it had been up to her, she would have much preferred to forget about the war and focus her attention on developing the country. If she had just a decade more, she was confident she could build Estoll into a kingdom at least as grand as Sindoria.

But unfortunately, Analissia was in no position to refuse to invade.

"It simply isn't enough," she muttered. It never was. No matter what she did, the power she held was always lacking. She was buoyed about by the winds of circumstance, made to take orders from fools, and always afraid. But what could she do besides to obey, even as the one giving her instructions seemed to have taken leave of their senses? She needed more power. It made her want to scream.

"Goodness, Analissia. You seem out of sorts. Has something happened? You know you can always come talk to me." Analissia heard a voice that sounded like cold water. She looked around, but she couldn't so much as sense the presence of the one speaking to her. A snickering, childish laugh filled the room. She looked up and saw a small child floating in midair.

"Ah, Lady Scarlet," Analissia said, doing her best to affect an air of calmness. "How long have you been here?" This floating child—or rather, this monster in a child's skin—was Analissia's superior.

"How long?" the thing asked in a child's high, unbroken voice. "My, how long *have* I been here, I wonder!"

The impudence of this creature was quite vexing. If it were possible, Analissia would have simply killed the girl and turned her into yet another pawn, but she had far, *far* too little power for that. "Why must you toy with me?" she asked. "If you had announced yourself, I could have prepared you a welcome, you know."

Lady Scarlet wore heels to disguise her height, but she was no more than 130 centimeters tall. Her hair flickered like bright flames, and her face wore a smile of supreme childlike innocence. She truly looked like a child, but twisted and

uncanny. She bore no weapon, but her mere presence was so oppressive that it stole away Analissia's breath and made her heart seize up in her chest. Among all the followers of the current demon king, she was the strongest, or perhaps the second strongest. The blood of the Lord of Calamity ran true in her veins. She was a genuine living example of an ancient demon.

The girl floated through the air, contorting her slender, lithe body as she pleased. "Oh, there's no need. I'm just here to give you a...postoperative checkup, I suppose? But if something's bothering you, I'd be happy to listen." She paused. "Actually, I take that back. That sounds really boring." She was such a moody child. Even the demon king had no real control over her, and she was Analissia's direct superior. It gave Analissia a headache just thinking about it.

"But never mind that," Lady Scarlet went on. "I hear little Rinoa was missing. I must say, I'm disappointed." A note of darkness crept into her bright voice. Her smile didn't falter for a second, but the eyes she regarded Analissia with were cold.

"I—" Unable to even breathe under the overwhelming pressure, Analissia struggled to find the right words to say. If she said nothing, she was certain that she would die. But the words she needed simply wouldn't come.

"That device of papa's was given to you under the assurance that you would release Rinoa and see her to safety. You really have let us down, haven't you?" Lady Scarlet's voice sent a shiver down Analissia's spine. She leaned in close to whisper in her ear. "Shall I break it, perhaps?"

Everything went black. Those words meant death itself. Analissia felt her head being torn from her body.

But it was only an illusion. "Gotcha!" Lady Scarlet said. "Just kidding! You don't gotta look so scared, jeez!"

Suddenly, the tension let up. Analissia gasped for breath. "A-Ah! Haah... Haah..."

"Well, to be fair, I guess that was a *bit* of a threat. But you're doing well, Analissia. Keep doing whatever seems right. Ah, but do make sure you find Rinoa." With that, Lady Scarlet and her menacing aura vanished without a trace. Neither the windows nor doors had been disturbed, although on closer

inspection, a number of sweets were missing from the table.

Reality seemed to be pressing in on Analissia. “Go to hell!” she screamed. Lady Scarlet was surely listening, but she just couldn’t hold in those words. “It’s still... It’s still not enough! But you’ll regret this someday! I *will* have what I desire—the world of my dreams!”

‡

“She just doesn’t get it, that girl...”

The yellow and blue light of the twin moons cast shadows that twisted and played in beautiful colors, illuminating the child flying through the air. She had scarlet hair that fluttered like flames, dancing around in radiant collars.

“She thinks I’m strong? She’s so upset that she can’t measure up to me? Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! What a joke!” Lady Scarlet knew full well that her strength amounted to very little compared to the true power of the ancient demons. “I suppose I can’t blame her for it, though. The poor girl never knew papa, after all.”

The Lord of Calamity was omniscient and omnipotent. He had a plan for every occasion and the strength to dispatch hordes of enemies with a smile on his face. His power was absolute. Overwhelming. So vast that to stand against it would be simple foolishness. His power was the envy of all.

Ah, and yet...

And yet, with all that power, he had struggled to protect even a single world. How could he not have, though, when that world had been full of so much senseless absurdity?

“But still!” the girl said. “Splitting up the continent like this is just nuts. Papa’s such a busybody! After two thousand years, he still treats me like a child. Idiot.” She sighed. Her form vanished into the darkness, her voice all that remained. “Rinoa must be off playing games somewhere, I suppose. If she doesn’t show up soon, I may have to pay auntie a visit...”

Chapter 5: The End of a Dream

Izuna awoke on her large, soft bed feeling oddly lonely. Her luxuriant bedroom felt far too big and empty. Even lying on her back with her arms and legs outstretched, she had plenty of room before she reached the edge of the bed. She looked to her sides but saw no sign of her parents, who usually slept in the same bed as her.

Izuna's parents were busy helping Analissia. Unlike her, they got up early in the morning to see to their work. Izuna missed them, but she understood why they had to be elsewhere. She brushed her bangs down over her eyes, hiding them from sight, then sluggishly got out of bed and left the room.

Izuna was a Greenfield, a member of the house of the Demon Eyes. She was a descendant of the one who had been found and cursed by the god of evolution while fighting on a battlefield. Her eyes were dark like the midnight sky, twinkling with tiny constellations of light. They had the power to destroy magic.

Until Analissia had taken Izuna in, the Greenfields had been treated as mere weapons by the people of Estoll. Because of their great utility when the kingdom had had need of strength in war, they were granted the title of nobility and given duties such as monster extermination. If they did well, they were rewarded with gold. Otherwise, they were cast aside and left to figure out the necessities of life on their own. None wanted to associate with members of the Greenfield family. After all, just being near some of them was enough to do serious harm to a person's body. Without truly incredible power, associating with them would end in death.

Because the clan of the Demon Eyes was so loathed, Izuna didn't go to school. There weren't even any private tutors willing to give her an education. She only had her mother and father to teach her about the world or how to use magic and fight.

"Izuna," her father used to say. "Nobody will ever come to your aid in your hour of need. You must become strong. Strong enough to survive on your own."

He trained her harshly for the sake of keeping her alive. After all, if she ever went for a walk through town, she would have stones and insults hurled at her, and she would be treated like some kind of monster. She didn't know why. She only knew that ever since she was small, she had been hated and hated and hated.

And so, Izuna came to hate in turn. She hated Estoll. She hated Sindoria. She hated humanity. She hated everyone in the entire world.

That was why Izuna could only be grateful to Analissia for taking her in. Analissia gave her a place to belong, clothed her, and gave her food. Analissia treated her with kindness, and above all else, had reunited her with her mother and father.

"Good morning, sister..." Izuna said. "Where are mama and papa?"

"They just left," Analissia replied. "They're busy with work now, so you mustn't bother them, okay?"

"Okay..."

"Good girl."

Izuna had once asked why Analissia was so nice to her. What Analissia told her was, *"Fifty percent is a tactical consideration. I simply desire the power of the Demon Eyes. Another twenty-five percent is my duty as one of Estoll's nobility. I have no reason to refuse aid to such a great asset of our kingdom. And the final twenty-five percent is because you are a child. Adults are meant to help children, Izuna. So please take advantage of my kindness all you like."*

Izuna didn't mind that Analissia was using her. Analissia had saved her after she'd lost everything, so she was just happy to have the opportunity to pay her back. And yet, somehow, she felt a strange distance between the two of them. Analissia possessed a beauty far beyond any human woman. Her hair flowed bewitchingly past her cold eyes and down to her alluring chest. Her every gesture was elegant yet restrained. She was hardly warm to anyone. The distance between her and Izuna was more than a few mere words could cross. So even though Izuna should, by all rights, love Analissia and be loved by her in turn, she somehow couldn't bring herself to accept Analissia's kindness.

“What are your plans today?” Analissia asked. She spoke in a gentle tone like always, but whenever Izuna caught sight of her cold eyes, she couldn’t help feeling small and overwhelmed. “Are you going to your usual place?”

“Yes...” Izuna answered. “I promised Aisha...” The girl she had found crying in her secret spot. The girl who had told her that her eyes were pretty and insisted on being friends with a pariah like her. Izuna’s one and only friend. They had met time and time again since then, and Aisha always spoke to her kindly and treated her with consideration. Somehow, the hatred she had buried deep within her heart didn’t stir at all around her. She was looking forward to seeing her again today. Just talking together about nothing made Izuna very happy.

“That’s right,” said Analissia. “I’m so glad you made a friend, Izuna! Will you be home in time for dinner?”

“I will...” Izuna replied, a smile on her face. She had a sister, a father, a mother, and a friend. Her one wish was that this happiness would continue forever and ever—that she might stay for all eternity in blissful stasis.

‡

The solitary tree looked lonesome in the shabby, dimly lit space. It creaked audibly as Izuna and Aisha sat down together on the swing. Sitting under this very tree and having endless, rambling conversations had become a daily habit for the pair.

“Aisha,” Izuna said with a frown as she swung higher, “you really do need to let your father spoil you more! If you act like his little girl, I’m sure the two of you can get along.” This was far from the first time she had made this suggestion.

“But I’m *not* a child!” Aisha protested. “He even tries to spoon-feed me, you know.” She blushed, embarrassed by the thought. It seemed like this must have been a fresh memory.

“You need to take a more active role!” Izuna declared. “At least tell him you want to spend the night together!” She spoke with the confidence of an older student. Izuna had no talent for making appropriate facial expressions, but she had pulled the corners of her lips up into a smile, seemingly proud of her superior experience.

“I mean...” said Aisha. “That isn’t really what I’m trying to say...”

“Hm?” Izuna cocked her head. “What do you mean by that?” But Aisha suddenly went silent.

“Nothing...” she said.

Izuna didn’t understand. She watched, puzzled, as Aisha sighed loudly. Though she didn’t know exactly what Aisha’s circumstances were, she had urged her time and time again to try to get closer to her reunited father.

The truth was that Aisha had done as Izuna had asked on the day they’d met and wished from the bottom of her heart to meet her father again. Minutes had passed, maybe half an hour, as she’d sat alone on that swing. Then, she’d heard her father’s voice. *“Hi there, Aisha! It’s time for dinner! You were out playing for quite a while! Or did you fall asleep? You’d best be careful. Sleeping in a place like this is a surefire way to catch a cold!”* Her father had come all the way through the winding alleys to this small, hard-to-find space to get her.

It was just like another time, when Aisha had fallen asleep listening to the voices of the spirits on the bank of a river. Her father now was acting exactly like how he had acted then, when he’d come alone to find her after night had fallen.

Aisha’s stomach had rumbled with hunger.

“What’s that?” her father had asked. *“Are you hungry? Well, I could do with a meal myself! I spent all day gathering fruit in the forest, after all!”* He’d then begun making preparations for food.

Izuna had said that if she wished and believed then it would come true. Aisha found that if she ever thought of something she wanted her father to do, her father would do exactly that. She’d spent a pleasant time reliving the past, her father moving as she willed. Now, Izuna said that if she let her father spoil her more, she would find happiness. She told her she should take baths with her father, and sleep in the same bed as him too. It was a baffling thing to say, but Aisha understood that Izuna was a kind girl, acting out of consideration for her well-being. Izuna had been in this city for longer than she had as well, and thus had fallen much deeper into its illusion.

“Are you getting along with your parents, Izuna?” Aisha asked.

“Of course!” Izuna replied cheerfully, smiling. “We slept in the same bed until morning today like always. My mama and papa are so kind...”

“I see,” said Aisha, a hint of loneliness in her voice.

“Do you not want to get closer to your father?” Izuna asked.

Aisha thought about how to respond. What *did* she want? What *should* she do? “I want to get closer...” she said. But before Izuna could cut in, she continued. “I want to get closer to you, Izuna. And to my Mistress.” That was the conclusion Aisha had reached upon meeting Izuna—that she needed to move on. “I can’t stay with my father. I want to get closer to you and her instead.” Aisha jumped down from the swing.

“What?!” Izuna said. “Aisha, do you hate your father?!” She jumped after Aisha and chased her down, her face contorted in a display of sadness in an attempt to stop her friend from leaving.

“I loved him!” Aisha shot back. “I loved my father so, so much, Izuna!”

“Then why?!”

“But that’s what makes this wrong! Please, Izuna, don’t you understand? I’ve only been here a little while and it’s so obvious to me! I don’t believe you don’t know! So why are you pretending you don’t know what’s going on?!”

Aisha’s father had come to get her, but Aisha wasn’t asleep at all. He’d prepared food, but he hadn’t gone to any kind of forest.

“No!” Izuna screamed. “Mama and papa are—”

Aisha shook her head. “I’m not wrong! I know it hurts! I know it’s hard! I know you want to cling to the past! But we can’t stay here forever! I’m my mistress’s servant!”

Knowing was not the same as understanding. Simply knowing wasn’t enough to make the pain stop and remove the weight from her chest. Even if her head understood, some corner of her heart was determinedly resisting the truth. That must have been why Nacht had given her this time.

“Thank you, Izuna,” Aisha said. “You helped me make up my mind by being

my friend and playing with me and listening to my problems. You helped me live in the present.”

“Aisha...” Izuna looked like she was on the verge of tears. Aisha extended her hand toward Izuna, but even after all the time they’d spent together, the girl still recoiled at the thought of touch.

“Let’s meet again tomorrow,” Aisha said, holding out her pinkie finger.

Izuna didn’t respond. She turned and ran away on tottering legs, crying miserably.

Aisha sat back down on the swing and asked herself what she should have said, but no answers came. It was lonely under the tree all by herself. Without Izuna there, the space looked different somehow.

“Where are you, Mistress?” she said as she kicked off the ground. “I miss you...”

‡

“Roy, get the bread!”

“Try this, Miel! It’s amazing!”

“Hey! Cruz took my meat!”

“Now, now. No fighting,” Tina said, remonstrating the children. The scene looked less like lively dinner conversation and more like a large-scale conflict. More than twenty children were gathered around the table in the Holy Church of the Ancient Dragons, crammed in elbow to elbow as they pillaged the dinner Nacht had prepared like the spoils of war. It had been like this every day since Nacht had started staying at the church.

“I’m sorry, Nacht.” Tina bowed courteously. “You’re meant to be the guest, but you’ve been cooking for us day after day.” So she said, but she was still holding a poultry leg in her hand and had a generous helping of meat on her own plate. Her face was smeared with sauce and grease.



Normally, the children here had to sate themselves with whatever food Tina gave them. But with her own increasing appetite, dinner had turned into a joyful scramble for food. The sight reminded Nacht of the dining table in the hall of her old guild, Outer Cafeteria. It made her feel quite nostalgic.

Cooking was a hobby Nacht had picked up after arriving in this world. Putting it to use for the church seemed like a good opportunity to prepare a lot of meat dishes, as she hadn't been eating much in the way of meat while living with Aisha. She had eagerly volunteered to cook for the church in place of a lodging fee. Some fairly high-quality ingredients were in the mix, though, so the struggle for food was fierce.

Some of the children lacked the courage to face the war of the dinner table. One such child was Lotte, a girl sitting by herself in a corner, watching as the food gradually disappeared. She seemed much more mature than Tina, sitting quietly like that, but the greed in her eyes was obvious.

"Don't wanna join in?" Nacht asked.

Lotte closed her eyes. "I'll just eat after everyone's finished..." she said. Noble words, but unbefitting of a child. The girl who *should* have adopted such an attitude, meanwhile, was in the thick of the melee.

"Hey! Roy! I wanted that one!" exclaimed the so-called priestess as she squabbled with the other children. "Grrrr... Dang it, Mina! I only took my eye off the pumpkin pie for a second and it's already gone! Ah, but I suppose I do need more balance in my diet. I'll let you have this one."

Nacht swiped Tina's plate out from under her and handed it to the hungry-eyed Lotte.

"Ahhh!" Tina protested. "What are you doing, Nacht?!"

Nacht ignored her and spoke to Lotte. "Sometimes, good things come your way by chance," she said. "But sometimes, if you don't reach for them, they'll slip through your fingers. You need to steel your courage and step forward. If you do, a whole world you know nothing about is waiting for you." She picked up a wooden spoon and took a spoonful of her special pudding, bringing it toward Lotte's mouth. The girl timidly leaned forward and bit down hard on the

pudding.

“Mmm!” she cried, a smile coming to her face. “Mnh! It’s so sweet! I like it!” Nacht gave her a gentle smile. “Thank you, Nacht!”

Nacht bowed and took a single sandwich from the table’s spread. Then, she turned her back on the chaos of the dining table and stepped outside. A quick hop and she was on the roof of the church. It was a pleasant place to relax, and Nacht had grown quite comfortable sitting here. From her high vantage point, she began casting a spell.

“*Ars Terra: Create Golem.*” Magic began to well up as she visualized the golem’s form. Human, she decided. A woman. She shaped its features to resemble her favorite and most beloved servant, but then stopped. Drowning her sorrows by playing with dolls didn’t sound at all appealing. She changed the golem’s image, keeping everything she had decided on until that point—its form as a human woman—but making it instead in the image of the cheerful priestess she had only met just recently.

A clump of earth began to move like a living thing. It twisted and contorted and quickly took the form of a human. Nacht’s magic flowed through it, bringing color to its skin. It looked exactly like Tina, from her slender limbs to her soft chest and hips to her brightly colored hair. Nobody looking at it would suspect that it was made out of clay.

Nacht looked over her handiwork, its lustrous hair fluttering in the breeze. “Hm,” she said. “Not bad, if I do say so myself.” But even Nacht’s magic could only create golems that resembled humans in shape. “*Control!*” she said, casting another spell. Her will entered the being with Tina’s form, ordering it to swing its clay sword.

The golem clutched the sword’s hilt, assumed a low stance, and lashed out with its blade. The wind sang as the sharp blade sliced through the air.

“What are you doing up there?” Tina cried, stepping cheerfully out of the church. They must have finished up with dinner. Then, she caught sight of the golem. “Wait, what the heck is that?! Is that *me*?! Do I have a doppelgänger?!”

“No, no,” Nacht reassured Tina, laughing to herself at the priestess’s reaction. “This is just a doll I made. How’d I do?”

“I-It’s incredible!” said Tina. “It looks just like me! It’s honestly kind of creepy.”

“I-It’s incredible!” said the doll, in a perfectly identical tone of voice. “It looks just like me! It’s honestly kind of creepy.”

“Wah! D-Don’t make it copy me! That seriously *did* creep me out!”

“Hey, this is just a little experiment of mine to see if combining creation magic with an infusion of mana can give me fine control of the golem. It looks like it’s not impossible to make these things act like humans.” Nacht waved her hand and the golem crumbled to nothing, returning to the earth. “But whatever’s creating the illusions of all those dead people is something else...”

Nacht reached deep into her memories. Thinking back, the most intense moments back in the game had been when she was selecting her classes and skills, walking the line between her peculiarities and the demands of practicality. It made her heart feel like it was going to burst. Nacht was created as Toru’s third character, the one in which he’d invested all of his weird fixations. Many of his memories revolved around investigating and selecting skills—more than most people who played Real World Online. But Toru’s memory was nothing compared to Nacht’s. She could remember tens, no, hundreds of thousands of skills perfectly. And yet, she had never heard of anything that could accomplish this. All she could think upon reaching the deepest part of her memory was that perhaps it was a skill unique to demons or some other type of creature.

“Even you can’t identify it, then?”

“So it seems,” said Nacht. “But don’t underestimate my ingenuity. I’ll figure it out.”

“I hope we figure it out soon,” Tina said. “I don’t think the departed would wish for us to cling to the past like this.” Her voice sounded oddly lonely. “There used to be thirty-four children here, you know...” Tina took a black-and-white photograph out from where it had been tucked in her shirt and showed it to Nacht, pointing out a number of children and naming them one by one. “That’s Vell...Filia...Yuri...Anri...Tellu...Linne...” None of them had been present at dinner earlier. “I have lots of people I would love to see too. I have precious

companions I'll never meet again for as long as I live. If only I had met the exalted fire dragon earlier...I may have been able to save them..."

As poor as they were back then, there had been no money to buy medicine when one of them fell ill or lost their strength. The church had gotten bigger and grander since Tina was chosen as the fire dragon's priestess.

"But..." Tina continued, "the dead do not return to us. I'm sure they've moved on. They probably wouldn't even want to return to life if they could..."

Nacht nodded along to Tina's words. "It's the egotism of the living that makes them want to return the dead to life," she said. "But on the other hand, I can't say they're wrong to wish their loved ones were still alive." If a person could distinguish between fantasy and reality, wanting someone to live and be happy was hardly a mistake. But most people simply masked their own selfish desires as concern for someone else.

"Wait," Nacht said. "Hang on." Those words, "the dead," prompted Nacht to suddenly recall something. "Kurone and Shirone aren't dead, are they? Was it just memories this whole time?"

"Nacht?" Tina looked curiously up at Nacht as the demiwyrm thought intensely.

Her first mistake had been when she'd spotted the Estoll soldiers in black. She had lumped them all together, but in retrospect, it was clear that the black figures were dolls while the woman in the red robes at the front of the unit was a human like Tina or Gyria. The woman's dress had left little to the imagination, but the dolls' black attire had hidden their bodies. They had been hiding their *forms*, concealing their unrefined appearances from sight so as not to disturb the human soldiers with them. Due to how many of them there were, Nacht had assumed that all of them were dolls, but now, she suspected that was not the case. Her thoughts were driving her toward a single conclusion—something that she suspected everyone living in this city already knew. The power that granted form, personality, and memory to the dolls only worked within the bounds of the city. It truly was the city of the gods.

"An AoE..." Nacht muttered, slipping back into game jargon. But there were hardly any skills or items in the game with an area of effect that could cover an

entire city. The famous Ultimate-tier item Holy War, owned by the head of the Armpit Lovers Unite guild, fit the bill, but it was a combat item. It didn't explain the unnatural events happening in Euto Fia. As for skills, Nacht could only think of one class of abilities that could affect that kind of area—illusion magic—but that seemed wrong as well. “*Ars Phantasia: Dreamland*, maybe? That spell might be able to lull the city into dreams of the past...”

One of Nacht's old companions was a dream-eater who specialized in debuffs. He—no, *she*—could cast illusions over a truly vast area. One of her spells could have easily trapped people in a perfect dreamworld.

“No.” Nacht dismissed the thought. “If whoever's doing this could use a spell like that, they wouldn't need to make dolls. They wouldn't need to implant a heart in someone to control them either.” In fact, they could have manipulated the people lost within a dream as they pleased, without their victims even being aware that they were following orders. Moreover, Nacht was confident that she, at least, could resist such a spell. So that possibility was ruled out. “Hmm... This is a tough one...”

“Ah ha ha,” Tina laughed. “You know, it's a bit of a relief to see that even you can be at a loss sometimes, Nacht.”

“I told you, don't underestimate my ingenuity. Especially when I have a reason to exert myself.” In truth, though, Nacht felt like she was being led around by the nose.

“I see,” Tina said. “Still, I must say, it really does seem like a pity.”

“What does?”

“If they really are able to draw on our memories of the past, I imagine it could be a wonderful power...if they weren't using it for evil.”

Tina's words struck a chord in Nacht's mind. They were nothing more than the girl's earnest sentiments, but to Nacht, they suggested yet another possibility. Thinking back, Nacht had assumed from the very start that whatever power was at work here was one of evil. After all, it had dragged Aisha back into her past, made light of Nacht's memories, and held all of Estoll in its sway. But perhaps she had jumped to conclusions.

“I see...” Nacht mused. “A wonderful power. I hadn’t considered that. You might be onto something, Tina.”

Another item from the game came to mind. It wasn’t a particularly rare item compared to the others she had been thinking of. There were one or two thousand of them in existence at the very least. It wasn’t special like an Ultimate-tier item, and it wasn’t as powerful as a dream-eater’s signature spells. It was, however, an item Nacht didn’t happen to have on hand.

“So let me get this straight,” Nacht said. “This all started with the rumor that the dead queen had returned to life. Is that right?”

“U-Um...” Tina blinked. “Y-Yes, I believe so.”

Nacht grinned playfully for the first time in a while. “In that case, we have our next stop. And soon...” Nacht looked out across the city, toward one particularly lovely soul. “Soon, Aisha, I’ll be ready to hear your answer.”

‡

Aisha found herself lost in a memory of a time far, far in the past.

“Flo...ra?” The village of Flora. A small settlement composed of only fields, a river, forests, and their own wooden cottage.

“Yup! That’s the name of our village! But you know, Aisha, the village of Flora is named after your mother!” Aisha’s father smiled gently.

“Named after mama!” Aisha repeated happily. Back then, she had yet to see her third birthday.

“Your mama’s an amazing woman! She’s a beauty, a pro at housework, and just out of this world at magic. She’s saved my bacon tons of times. This farm wouldn’t be half as splendid without her!” What face had her father been making as he said that? Aisha couldn’t remember... “One day, your mama will come back here to us. We’ve just got to be patient.”

“Okay!” said Aisha. “I’ll be patient for mama too, daddy!”

“Good girl. You promise?”

“Yes, I promise!”

A promise they made one day long ago.

Aisha found herself lost in a memory of a time far, far in the past.

“What’s wrong, Aisha? Good luck itself’s gonna run away from you if you keep making faces like that!”

“Saria and Aluna were both making fun of me...” Aisha sobbed. “They called me a blockhead.”

She felt her father’s big hand touch the back of her head and begin to gently pat it. “It’s all right. Don’t let them get to you. You’ve got big things ahead of you, Aisha! You’re mine and your mother’s daughter, after all! So please, don’t rush yourself. Just keep on growing at your own pace. One day, you’re gonna be bigger and stronger and kinder than all those mean kids put together.”

“Will I really...?” Aisha said, doubt evident in her voice. Her father nodded emphatically.

“I know you will. You’ve got your father’s guarantee.”

“W-Well, when I’m all big and strong, I’m gonna pay you back lots and lots and lots!”

“Ah ha ha! I’ll look forward to the day you do!”

A promise Aisha could never fulfill.

The third commercial district within the special development zone was Estoll’s marketplace of the future, superior in both commercial and natural sciences. It was no surprise that they had several inns offering lodgings to travelers and merchants alike. Aisha had rented a fairly spacious room to spend the nights, and every evening, without fail, her father would be waiting for her in her room after sunset.

Tonight was no different. He smiled gently as he prepared dinner for the two of them. “Oh! Welcome home, Aisha!”

That must have been what Aisha had wished to see. She smiled back like Izuna had told her she should, but said nothing.

“Aisha?” her father said, worry in his voice. But Aisha wasn’t even listening. She just stared at the figure of her father, Roland—forty-two years old, as he had been when he died. Roland had been getting up there in years, but his youthful face and toned physique made him look five years younger than his actual age. He had kind eyes that Aisha loved; they showed his emotions so clearly. And his body language, now expressing worry over his daughter, was just as she remembered. It was a perfect recreation of her father.

“But still...” Aisha said. “If I really just stared at him silently like that, my real father would start panicking right away. He’d say, ‘What’s wrong, Aisha?! Are you hurt?! Do you need me to make you a poultice?!’” She giggled at the thought, then she laughed out loud. She had never realized how similar her father was to her beloved mistress in that way.

Her bewildered father seemed like he was about to say something, but Aisha held up her hand, cutting him off. “No thank you,” she said gently but sternly. “No more words, please.” Wish, and it would be granted. But stop wishing and it would end. “To tell you the truth, I knew from the very beginning that you weren’t my father. I’ve been a bad girl. I knew you weren’t real, but I just wanted you and Mistress and Izuna to stay by my side forever. I’ve been so bad...” Aisha hung her head like she was confessing her sins.

There was no need for her father to respond. He stood there and listened. This was nothing more than a ritual Aisha needed to complete.

The very first day Aisha had met this copy of her father, he had talked about Nacht, saying, *“She was cute! Maybe she’ll make good wife material when she’s a bit older!”* But that had been an absurd thing for him to say.

“You never would have said that,” Aisha went on. “No human would say something like that after Mistress almost killed them.” Nacht’s murderous intent had been enough to stop Aisha’s breath, and she hadn’t even been the target of her mistress’s enmity. It was an overwhelming force before which mortals could do nothing but tremble. And yet her father had recovered his spirits immediately, asking if Nacht was Aisha’s friend and praising her as cute.

Aisha had made excuses, played along with the ruse, and even tried to convince herself that it was fine. But in the end, this man simply wasn’t her

father. Someone who did whatever Aisha desired was a far cry from the father she knew. Thinking back, even the words that had pierced her heart—*“Well, what brings this up now?”*—had been taken from her memories.

She could just about recall the exchange. It had gone something like this:

“Papa!” Aisha had said. *“Did you see that? I skipped that stone fifteen times!”*

“Whoa!” her father had exclaimed. *“Is that a new record?”*

“So...does that mean...”

“Hm? Do you want something, Aisha? A reward? I can get you a reward!”

“No! Papa, you promised that you’d treat me like a grown-up when I beat your record!”

“I see. I suppose I may have said something like that. But... Well, what brings this up now? Is something wrong?”

“If I’m an adult, I should be allowed to help around the house! I’ll cook dinner today, okay? And tomorrow, we can go to the forest together!”

“H-Hang on! The forest is dangerous, you know!”

“But I’m an adult now! I’m allowed!”

“Hrm. Well...”

Ultimately, those had been nothing more than words her father had uttered at some point in his past. He had nothing at all to say to the Aisha of the present.

“I’m sorry, papa...” Aisha said, but her words of apology were not meant for the figure in front of her. They were for her departed father, who had raised her for most of her life. “I called something that wasn’t you my papa. I insulted your memory.” Aisha had fallen into the illusion of her father. She hadn’t listened to her mistress, whom she knew to be correct, but had instead let herself be taken in and doted on by the fake time and time again. “I’m so, so sorry.” Aisha bowed low, pressing her forehead into the floor so hard it left a mark. “I understand how important it is to live in the present. And I know how precious

the present is too. My father's love is with me in the present, and so are Izuna and Mistress Nacht."

Aisha was done. She'd wallowed in the past for long enough. As soon as the declaration left her mouth, the doll that had been imitating Roland was enveloped by light and returned to its original form. All that was left was a lifeless mannequin.

"Thank you," Aisha said to the doll. "I had a nice dream." Then, she left the inn and stepped out into the pitch-black night. She looked up at the sky. "I'm going to keep the promises I can. Don't worry."

No, that wasn't it. There was something much more important she needed to say, even if it made her cry. Even if it was sad. Even if it hurt. Even if she couldn't help sobbing out loud.

"I'm sorry I never said this until now," she began. She put all of the love and emotion she could behind her words. "Thank you for taking care of me, papa."

Aisha smiled, filled with genuine joy.

‡

The sight of the battle defied all expectations. Screams of anguish filled the air. An army some few thousand strong tore a hole through the Sindorian force. The front line had fallen, and the commanders were in disarray. The soldiers in black advanced mercilessly, like hunters closing in on fleeing prey. They had cast aside their robes to reveal full suits of enchanted steel armor. Arcane geometric sigils were engraved in the frames of their armor, which moved as if they were alive. There was something unsettling about the way they moved—as if they were some type of unknown creature merely assuming human forms.

"Raaaaahhh!!!" A brave knight on the front lines dove into the ranks of the armored aberrations. He swung the hefty, rough-hewn greatsword in his hands with enough force to cleave through human flesh and shatter bone. But it was no use. It was like trying to cut through a boulder. The sword impacted a soldier's armor with a hollow ringing sound and shattered, a fragment from the destroyed sword rebounding and cutting the knight on the cheek. His arms then lost their strength and he dropped his sword.

“N-No!” he shouted. “Stay back!” The doll showed no emotion as it closed in on the disarmed knight. Its arms were enormous—each as wide around as the knight’s waist. It used its powerful limbs to seize the knight by his head, which it twisted clean off. Then, it continued marching forward, making distorted mechanical sounds as it dragged its enormous arms behind it.

The Estollian force had passed through the Leegh mountain range numbered twenty-five thousand, while the army Sindoria had sent to meet them was seventy thousand strong. They had met in an open plain, each with an unobstructed view of their enemy, and commenced battle. It had scarcely been an hour since then, but the Sindorian forces were in total disarray.

“I see,” murmured Margrave Reinholt as he surveyed the field. “With those machines on their side, it’s no wonder Estoll seemed so strangely confident in their victory.”

House Reinholt was a powerful noble family that governed the lands from the Leegh mountains all the way out to the Sindorian border with Estoll. They were famous for their military acumen—one full half of the seventy thousand soldiers Sindoria had sent to the field had been mobilized by the Reinholts. After all, theirs was the responsibility of defending Sindoria’s vast borderlands from invasion by monsters or other kingdoms. They had far, far more soldiers in their employ than any other noble family. Margrave Reinholt had led countless expeditions to the south, slaying monsters that threatened the people. He knew the area well and was the natural choice to lead the united Sindorian army.

“Are you surprised they had something up their sleeve?” Yuri asked. She had been sent here to assist the margrave as a “punishment” by Her Highness The Princess.

“Flabbergasted!” answered Margrave Reinholt. “I never imagined they would have something like *that*. I’m not sure how much of this we can take. Dame Yuri, Madame Krista, what do you make of those dolls?”

The two looked over the scene playing out on the front lines just in time to see the main brigade of mages launch a desperate flurry of magic, sacrificing the soldiers engaged with the enemy to try to destroy the accursed dolls. Dozens, even hundreds of fireballs filled the sky, raining down on the front.

“Did they get them?” The knights watched hopefully as the army of dolls burned before their eyes. But the dolls began to move forward again even as their bodies burned, emerging one by one from the inferno. “No...! Those damned things just won’t die!”

“Is that...water?” One of the knights asked, his mouth agape. Each member of the unnatural army marching steadily through the fire was enveloped in a mass of water as if it were a suit of armor. It was clear that they were not living beings. They were silent as they attacked, showing no trace of emotion amid the carnage, only regarding their enemy with cold, hollow eyes.

Next came the Estolian mages’ counterattack. Spells flew through the sky. Without the means the dolls had to protect themselves, the humans comprising Sindoria’s army fell by the hundreds.

“Their magic resistance is a problem,” observed Krista. “Most of our mages specialize in fire magic, which seems to be particularly ineffective. It would be one thing if it were only the water shields, but it seems the dolls themselves can use mana stored in crystals to cast spells.”

“Would you be able to destroy them with your magic?” Yuri asked.

“Perhaps,” replied Krista. “But we also have Reanna the Spell-Mad to deal with. And the more of my own mana I use, the less I have to defend against a large-scale magic assault. What about you, Yuri? Do you think your sword could cut through those dolls?”

“Could it? Certainly. But it doesn’t seem as though being cut into pieces slows them down in the slightest. I could immobilize them by removing both legs, maybe, but doing so would ruin my sword. I wonder if a heavy blunt weapon would be effective...”

Krista’s and Yuri’s opinions only served to reinforce Margrave Reinholt’s judgment that to fight any further would only serve to increase their own side’s casualties. He had already suffered grave losses, but fortunately, most of the warriors on the front lines were nobles drunk on the prospect of easy victory and eager to win some merit by being the first into the fray. He hadn’t been expecting such a crushing defeat, but even the prince himself had told him beforehand that it was of no consequence if a few upstart nobles got squashed.

Margrave Reinholt's personal forces, the mage battalion, and Yuri and the other elite fighters were yet unharmed.

"We should take this to mean that our numerical superiority will give us no advantage," the margrave deliberated. His plan had been simple: to meet in an open plain where they could use their numbers to their advantage and send the enemy packing. The battle plan had been designed with that in mind as well, but the unnatural dolls Estoll used as soldiers were each equal to one hundred of Sindoria's human fighters. The nobles in charge of directing the front lines had fled when faced with such an enemy, saving their own skins and leaving Sindoria with no hope of victory. "Madame Krista, join up with the second and third mage battalions. Hit them with a big one. We're withdrawing to the hill."

"Yes, sir!"

The Sindorian army moved quickly once the decision was made. They used their combined magic to blind the enemy, then pulled back to the encampments they had prepared ahead of time.

Margrave Reinholt was calm and collected. It was true that the unknown soldiers were a threat, but he would win this war, even if Sindoria herself were to fall. "A direct assault would be foolish," he said. "That leaves us with two options. We could attack their supply lines, perhaps, or else lure them into the swamp..."

‡

The soldiers in black, the ones beyond Grascas's command, marched on with inhuman gait. It had looked for a moment like the Sindorian army was on the brink of collapse, but they had transitioned into a hasty retreat, covering their tracks with magic. It was a marvelously executed stratagem. Grascas could only respect the level of discipline displayed by the Sindorians.

Victory had not raised Grascas's spirits in the slightest. Reanna had led her forces ahead and scattered the front lines into the wind, whereas all he had been able to do was order spells cast at opportune times. As quickly as it had begun, the first battle had come to a close.

"Preposterous," Grascas spat. "To think the prime minister's dolls would be *that* effective in combat." The nobility of Estoll was well aware that the court

wizard they had made prime minister had created the automatons used as labor in the special development zone, but Grascas had only known them to be used for menial labor. The sight of them wielding weapons, casting spells, and crushing the enemy army was new. He knew that Reanna's black-clad force was made up of dolls, of course, but he had just seen scores of them get torn apart by a mysterious attacker from the sky. He'd had no idea they were so powerful.

There was so much Grascas didn't know. Was he truly so utterly powerless?

"Didn't you tell me," Grascas said, addressing Reanna, "that those dolls were mass-produced from iron and magic crystal? I thought they were supposed to be relatively weak."

"Hah!" Reanna laughed. "I wouldn't have brought that rabble along if they weren't useful, you know!"

Knowing that they could mass-produce dolls like this, suddenly, the idea of invading Sindoria didn't seem quite so absurd. But something was still bothering Grascas. "This..." he began. "Whatever this is, it isn't a war." He looked over at one of the dolls in black. It had taken quite a bit of damage—half of its limbs were missing and it had a good half dozen holes littering its chest. Without hesitating, the doll took hold of a red-hot magic crystal and hurled itself at the enemy. It quickly turned red, and then exploded in a flash of light so hot that Grascas could hear the audible sound of flesh sizzling.

"But isn't that a good thing?" Reanna asked, smiling cheerfully. "All shall be as His Majesty wills it."

Grascas simply looked out over the battle in silence.

‡

It was the morning after Aisha had parted ways with her father's memory. She made her way through the bustle of the crowd to a back alley with few signs of habitation. It seemed to be an old road left behind in the confusion of redevelopment. Stray cats perched on dilapidated roofs stared at her as she moved silently toward the place where she and Izuna had spent time together.

Izuna had seemed badly hurt by Aisha's decision to part ways with the doll of her father. Aisha was worried that she wouldn't be here at all. The place they'd

played together now felt like Izuna's territory alone. But as Aisha drew closer, she heard a noise—the creak of the branch as someone's weight settled into the swing.

"Izuna! You're here!" Aisha ran out to meet her friend, but the person waiting for her was not the girl she was expecting. It was a grown woman with an air of cold beauty.

"I'm afraid you must excuse me," the woman said. "I am not the girl you're looking for."

"And...who are you?" Aisha asked. For some reason, the sight of this woman put her on guard. She was a perfect beauty with soft, elegant manners and wearing a light-purple dress. She spoke with a kind but dignified air, the very picture of a noblewoman. She peered at Aisha, seemingly confused by the girl's defensive stance. Aisha took a step backward.

"Oh, has Izuna not told you? My name is Analissia Rainfiel. I am Izuna's guardian." She looked at Aisha with cold eyes, like Aisha was entirely without value. She smiled kindly, but something in her eyes looked subtly wicked. It was like she wasn't looking at Aisha at all.

"She told me she had a sister..." Aisha said.

"So you have heard of me! I'm glad to hear it." Analissia stood up from the swing and took a step forward.

"Where is Izuna?" Aisha asked. The weight of Analissia's cold glare was only making Aisha more forceful.

Analissia laughed politely. She seemed unbothered by Aisha's rudeness. "Izuna is resting at home. She wanted me to give you a message: she doesn't want to meet today, I'm afraid. But this is a good opportunity for me, as there is something I have been wanting to say to you." She narrowed her eyes and looked down on Aisha with palpable contempt. "I would appreciate it if you refrained from involving yourself with Izuna any further than you have."

"Wh-What? Why...?" Aisha found herself at a loss for words in the face of Analissia's proclamation. But a second later, her confusion turned to anger. Even if this woman was nobility, Aisha's temper had its limits. "Izuna is my

friend!” Aisha declared. “You have no right!”

“Oh?” Analissia said, cool and composed in the face of Aisha’s anger. “You don’t understand much of the world, do you? I suppose you are a child, after all.” She seemed to be looking down on Aisha as a stupid little girl. “You understand that Izuna is Estollian nobility, and currently a scion of House Rainfiel, no? Someone of her station is not free to associate with strangers, let alone a commoner. Besides, I am her guardian, you know. She’s been depressed ever since meeting you. It’s only natural that I would be worried about her.”

Analissia had made a number of sound, reasonable points, but Aisha could tell that she was lying. Neither Analissia’s eyes, her attitude, nor her words betrayed even a hint of concern for Izuna. Analissia was not worried. She simply wanted to hurt Aisha. Aisha was not about to take it lying down, though.

“You’re wrong!” she said. “Izuna’s just thinking things over! I’m sure that she’s trying to figure out how to move forward even now!”

Aisha had been trying to teach Izuna what Nacht had taught her—the harsh reality of death. She was sure she had gotten through, and that that was why Izuna was in so much pain right now. She was dealing with her own inner conflict. If Aisha didn’t support her now, what kind of friend would she be?

Without Nacht by her side, Aisha was no more than a child. And yet, she glared back at Analissia with all the fierceness she could muster.

“You’re bad at listening too, I see...” Analissia said. “In that case, let me make things clear. You have made yourself an enemy of House Rainfiel. However, I will overlook your behavior so long as you leave the city and wash your hands of this whole affair. I am prepared to pay you a cash settlement if you’ll cooperate.” Analissia’s proclamation brooked no argument. She could tell that Aisha was a commoner—that she had a persistent voice in her head telling her not to argue with nobility. “That is an order from a noble. Understand?”

That was sure to put an end to things. She turned to leave, satisfied that she had no need to bother listening to Aisha’s response.

Aisha stared as Analissia turned to leave, shaking like a branch in the wind. A voice in her heart was telling her that if she didn’t stop Analissia right now, she would never see Izuna again. She wasn’t even aware that she was opening her

mouth to speak. "I-I refuse!"

Analissia came to a halt. "Excuse me?" she said, menace creeping even further into her voice. No, the subtle menace had crossed the line to open enmity. She regarded Aisha again, glaring with every ounce of contempt she could muster.

But Aisha refused to give in to fear. What mattered was her friend, who had supported her during these past days. Analissia's words meant nothing at all. Aisha's heart had been on the brink of collapse, but by some twist of fate, Izuna had been there to offer her kindness and support.

Aisha cared deeply about Izuna. To help her, she was prepared even to stand against the lofty nobility who ruled the world from on high. Since becoming the servant of Nacht Schatten, she had vied with the likes of dragons and royalty. She was far past letting some haughty noble tell her what to do.

Deep down, however, Aisha was still a villager. No matter what she told herself, she couldn't help being afraid of the nobility. But doing nothing was much, *much* more frightening. Keeping her mouth shut would only cause her greater and greater pain.

"You may..." Aisha began with a shaky voice, mustering her courage. "You may be a noble, but that doesn't make it right for you to separate us! I'm sure my mistress would agree!" That's right. Aisha had no reason to back down. "Izuna is my friend! You mind your own business!" Suddenly Aisha realized what she was saying and panicked. "Um...that is...if you don't mind?" she added, weakly. But it didn't matter. She had said everything she needed to.

Silence filled the air like the calm before a storm. And then, just as suddenly, the silence vanished. "I see," Analissia said. It seemed like she had decided on a change of plans. "Enough of this, then. Meddlesome child." Her voice changed suddenly, becoming forceful and yet gloomy, like she was swapping masks. It matched the cold eyes she had been glowering at Aisha with. Aisha understood immediately that this was Analissia's true voice.

"You are such a brat," Analissia sighed. "I had hoped we could come to an understanding. It would have been much easier. But I suppose I have no particular reason to want to work things out with you. There's a much easier

way to be rid of problems, you know. Are you prepared to die?”

The atmosphere shifted. The air felt tense. Suddenly, a crowd of dolls—more than a dozen of them—surrounded Aisha.

“Dolls?” Aisha said. “Then...are you the one...?”

“I am,” said Analissia. “Although you don’t know the half of it. Still, you understand the gist, I think. I am the one who made the dolls, the one who gave Izuna her present, and the one who created the special development zone. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

In other words, it was Analissia who had made those dolls in the image of Aisha’s father and Izuna’s parents. Aisha’s anger surged yet higher, like a hurricane inside her. “You!” she shouted. “You’re the one who set those fake parents on us! And now, Izuna—”

Analissia laughed derisively at Aisha’s words. “Hah! You lot really are quite the collection of idiots, aren’t you? Most of your responses have been wildly off the mark. I’m afraid you have no idea what you’re talking about. Really, you must consider the limits of my power. It was your wish that was granted, and yet you intend to place the blame on me? Even for an idiot, that’s quite a feat of stupidity.” Aisha stopped in her tracks, overwhelmed by the verbal assault and the physical threat of the dolls. “Ah...” Analissia continued. “But I must admit one thing. When it comes to Izuna, you have at least some comprehension of the truth. Well done indeed.” She grinned fiendishly, as if giving unwanted praise to a defiant pupil.

“What do you mean?!” Aisha shouted back. “What have you done to Izuna?!”

Analissia’s grin turned cold. “Me?” she said, openly malicious. “Her precious big sister? Well, I suppose I did put myself in that position. She really is a tremendous idiot, loving me as much as she does. It’s almost funny, isn’t it? That the little brat now calls the woman who killed her parents her beloved family? Honestly, it’s hilarious. She has no idea, and it’s because she doesn’t want to know! She keeps running from the truth like she’s noticed nothing at all! It’s all very convenient for me! I haven’t heard of anything funnier in my life!”

Aisha made up her mind. This was not acceptable. She didn’t understand

everything Analissia had said, but she knew she could never allow this deceitful woman with her scornful grin—the woman who had killed Izuna’s parents—to come anywhere near her friend. She invoked the spirits, which lashed out at Analissia as a blade. A doll took the blow for its mistress, deep gouges forming on its arms as it blocked the blade of wind.

“Manners!” Analissia began. “You must *listen* when—” Another blade flew through the air, cutting her off midsentence. The air was full of blades of wind, hacking away as the dolls sacrificed themselves to protect Analissia.

Aisha prayed to the spirits to destroy Analissia, but because of the turmoil in her heart, she was having trouble controlling her mana. It was all she could do to silently launch attack after attack. It was a simple fighting style, but as she was now, Aisha was in no state to think tactically about the situation.

Before long, the ground was littered with dolls that had been cut to ribbons. Not a single attack had hit Analissia herself, however. “Haah... Haah...” Aisha panted, heaving her shoulders from having overexerted herself. Her body felt heavy.

“Are you finished with your tantrum?” Analissia asked, looking coldly down at her. “Then let us be done with this.”

“What are you doing to Izuna?!” Aisha demanded. “Why would you be so horrible?! What could you possibly want?! Thanks to you, that girl is all alone in the world!” Even if Izuna herself would deny it, that was how Aisha saw things. She would have never come up to speak to Aisha in the first place if she hadn’t been alone.

“Gods above, I hate dealing with fools,” Analissia said, disdain in her voice. “You never think. You know nothing about this situation. You have no idea how feeble you truly are. You just insist and insist that whatever you’re feeling is justice. Ah, but I suppose I’ll tell you just one more thing. Izuna was always alone. She was alone on the day she was born, and she will be alone on the day she dies. I simply took advantage of that for my own gain. Every living being is born into a world of constant struggle. If she doesn’t understand that, is it my fault for taking advantage of her? Even the heroes of the past were nothing more than pawns, used by forces they didn’t understand without ever noticing.

Consider the clan of Demon Eyes. For all their hard-earned power, it availed them nothing. Why, then, should I not use Izuna's power for my own? I am giving her happiness in return, after all. She will die with no regrets."

Aisha could only take those words to be the height of villainy. This woman had trapped Izuna within a false dream, treating her like livestock, completely unashamed. She thought about it, and concluded that Analissia was simply evil. "That's inhuman..." she muttered, pure fury in her eyes.

"No," Analissia said. "I am the true face of humanity." She seemed to really believe it. "That girl needs to be alone. If she were to make a friend, it would be very inconvenient for me. Now..." *Die!* The dolls began to move according to Analissia's will, abandoning defense entirely to come at Aisha with deadly force.

Aisha's thoughts were finally calm, but the anger had taken its toll. Her body felt heavy, and her mana was spent. She should have noticed earlier that Analissia was simply taking her attacks, allowing her to wear herself out. Another doll appeared behind her, emerging from the ground itself. It grabbed her, holding her arms immobile behind her back. Aisha screamed, but her mana was in too much disarray. No spirits came to answer her call.

"I heard you were of elven blood," Analissia said. "Naturally, I took precautions." The horde of dolls hurled their blades through the air, right toward Aisha. It was a hopeless situation. Aisha's spirit magic was hardly working at all, and her arms and legs were bound. The shining blades drew closer.

She thought that she should have run away at the very start—the second she'd realized Analissia was waiting here for her. That must have been why Analissia had begun by speaking about Izuna. It had all been to bait Aisha into staying. She saw that now. But it was already too late. With her spirit magic not responding, there was nothing she could do to stop the blades hurtling toward her.

The blades were inches away from her face, about to tear her to shreds and end her young life, when something strange happened. It happened so fast that it was impossible to tell what, but the results were obvious. The dolls all lay broken on the ground, ripped to pieces by some overwhelming force.

Standing before her was someone Aisha didn't recognize. Her beautiful blue hair, about as long as Nacht's, fluttered in the breeze. She seemed to be the only person there who knew what was going on.

The newcomer rested her cheek in her hand in a cutesy pose and regarded the scene for a long moment before speaking. "Not allowed, I'm afraid," she said. "If you kill that girl, Mistress will have my head."

‡

Despite how it may have looked to Aisha, the dolls had not actually appeared from nowhere. The materials for constructing them had been placed in this area ahead of time, hidden in places that were obscured from view. Analissia had simply used magic to transform the materials into working dolls.

Disabling Aisha's spirit magic had also been simple to accomplish: a spent magic crystal buried in the ground. Magic crystals were formed out of ambient mana, which they stored within themselves. The more one had its mana exhausted, the more it would draw in mana from the surrounding area to replenish itself, blunting the effects of Aisha's spells.

Spirit magic had different characteristics from other types of spellcasting. Ordinarily, when casting magic, a mage would use their mana to materialize a spell. Spirit magic, on the other hand, was cast by transferring the caster's magic to the spirits, who would use it to create the desired effect. In other words, the caster's only role was to offer up their power. And instead of the spirits, Analissia's crystal had sat there, greedily devouring every bit of mana Aisha tried to send out.

Analissia had made all these arrangements solely to kill the girl who had gotten close to Izuna. It should have gone off without a hitch. But it hadn't.

It was as if this woman had appeared from nowhere. Analissia had had no awareness of her existence before she'd materialized in front of her very eyes, like the kind of eerie trick of vision one might get after staring deep into the darkness for a long time. Even with her in plain view, Analissia could not sense her presence at all. Her irises were ringed with circles of dots. Her long hair was blue like the depths of the sea. Her beguiling form seemed to cast a shadow over everything around her. It was clear that she was not human.

Analissia trembled. Her instincts were telling her to flee from this unknown figure. *Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What?!* For just a second, she stared in confusion. But she regained her senses quickly. *What in the hells is that?! I need to get away!* she thought, making up her mind to escape.

The woman's unknown power had torn Analissia's dolls into bits and pieces. She had brought them here as pawns to kill Aisha, but now, they were strewn over the ground. They'd all been bent out of shape, had their limbs torn off, or been pulverized. Only the butler and maid dolls Analissia had kept in reserve were still in one piece. Analissia called the pair forward and they stepped up, covering her.

"Who are you?" Analissia said coldly, keeping the emotions raging in her chest tightly controlled as she shifted her weight back, ready to run at any time.

"Oh, are you running away?" the thing in front of her with a woman's form asked, seeing effortlessly through Analissia's intentions. "In that case, go right ahead. My orders don't say anything about hunting you down." In other words, this thing had no interest in Analissia whatsoever. If the words were meant to get under her skin, they worked like a charm. She found the whole situation very vexing indeed.

Analissia glared at the detestable woman. She looked young, but Analissia had the feeling that she was at least thousands of years old. She reminded Analissia somehow of another ageless being she knew with the body of a young girl. Perhaps it was because Analissia knew *her* that she hadn't taken leave of her senses entirely upon encountering this thing. She had some experience, after all, facing a being of overwhelming power, above and apart from mere mortals.

"Very well," Analissia said. "I will take you at your word. I don't want to be your enemy. If I can help it, I would like us to stay out of each other's business entirely. You may tell your mistress that if this child is so important to her, I will refrain from laying a hand on her again."

Analissia was convinced of at least one thing—that all of her recent problems must have had something to do with this mysterious woman. Sleeping Beauty going missing, Reanna's report of an attack by an unidentified assailant, the failure to secure Tina after her escape, Izuna's half-elf friend, and now, her

failure to finish that friend off. Something was setting her plan off course.

What was it that thing said earlier? Analissia thought. *Her mistress would have her head? That freak monster's head?!* The more she thought about it, the worse it seemed. The woman hadn't seemed like she was joking. Whoever that monster called "mistress" must have had some reason behind her actions. As much as she hated it, her best option really seemed to be to run away for the time being. She had no means of fighting against such power. Even if she used Izuna, her chance of victory would be slight. Her enemy seemed at least on par with the annoying little girl who gave her orders.

Analissia withdrew, trusting that something would come of all this.

‡

"Whaaat?!" Aisha exclaimed, dumbfounded by everything that had occurred. "Um...what just happened?" All she knew was that this strange woman had appeared suddenly and saved her life. She decided she should at least thank her rescuer. "Excuse me! You, um, saved me, didn't you? Th-Thank—" But the woman was gone, vanished into the mist. She reappeared right in front of Aisha, where she leaned in close. Her beautiful features drew nearer and nearer to Aisha's face until...

"*Smooch!*" She planted a soft kiss right on Aisha's cheek, cutting off her train of thought. The touch felt ominous, like those lips could swallow her whole.

"What...?" she said, uncomprehending. A moment passed, and it dawned on her what had just happened. Her face turned bright red. "Whaaaaat?!?!?! Wh-What did you do that for?!" she blurted, absolutely flustered.

"Hm?" the woman said. "Just a bit of revenge on Mistress, I suppose."

"What are you talking about?!" Aisha shouted. "Why would that make you give me a *k-k-kiss*?!"

"So tense!" the woman said. "It was just a little peck on the cheek. But if you *really* don't like it... Well, come to think of it, I suppose a bit of punishment is in order for you after all, isn't it, Aisha?"

Aisha had no idea what was going on. Who was this woman who seemed to know her name and spoke to her so familiarly? "I-I don't understand!" she

protested. “Who are you, anyway?” The woman was an adult, so Aisha needed to crane her neck up to look her in the face. Her eyes were deep crimson and ringed with black dots. Aisha found them to look very sinister. Izuna’s eyes had been beautiful and captivating, but this woman’s eyes only instilled fear into her heart.

“You may call me Levi,” the woman said. “I’m an avatar of one of the seven deadly sins—kind of a big shot among devils. Mistress ordered me to protect you, so you’d better be grateful, understand?”

There was a lot about that introduction that didn’t make much sense to Aisha, but there was only one question on her mind. “By ‘Mistress,’ do you mean...?”

“Yup, it’s the one you’re thinking of.”

Aisha clutched her chest. “Mistress Nacht...” she whispered. A flood of emotions accompanied that name, and a warmth filled her chest, threatening to spill out of her eyes as tears.

“I’m the one who saved you, though...” Levi muttered darkly.

“O-Oh! Of course! I’m sorry!” Aisha said, giving Levi a quick bow. “Thank you, Miss Levi! You saved my life! I’m very grateful!” Aisha didn’t want to imagine what would have happened if Levi hadn’t been there. It was true that she was grateful to her. What really touched her, though, was knowing that even after how she and Nacht had parted ways, her mistress was still watching over her.

“Who cares?” Levi said, sulking like a child. “What matters is that you’re safe.” She took a step back from Aisha with a showy spin and bopped the girl lightly on her bowed head. “But *you* need to be a bit more aware of your own value!”

“Huh? M-My value?”

“Not to brag, but I’m pretty damn incredible for a devil,” Levi said. “Even in the world I come from, there aren’t many who are stronger than me. But there are things on that side that even I can’t hope to face. Monsters that it would take ten or twenty people like our mistress to even *hope* to fight.”

Levi spoke like a teacher delivering an important lesson. Aisha instinctively stood up straight to listen, but the scale of what Levi was saying was so great that she could hardly wrap her head around it. She couldn’t possibly imagine

someone stronger than her mistress, let alone something that could possibly pose a challenge to multiple beings on such a high level.

“That means, of course,” Levi went on, “that when fighting in that world, the more allies you can bring, the better. But you know something, Aisha?” Levi’s eyes turned serious. Something about her tone of voice made Aisha’s heart skip a beat. “Our mistress never shared her power with anyone. Even on the charnel fields of battle, she never deigned to create a soulbound servant. But she chose you. She chose *only* you. Think for a moment about what that means—about how valuable that makes you. You are the one whom our mistress saw fit to give her power. You need to value yourself more and give proper thanks for that body of yours. Or at least, that’s *my* opinion.” Such was Levi’s unsolicited advice.

Aisha tried to take Levi’s words to heart, but she couldn’t quite manage it. She had always been a shy and reserved girl, after all, not to mention the type to think negatively about herself. Even if someone else saw her as amazing, she simply couldn’t see herself that way. That wasn’t about to change just because someone told her she needed to value herself more highly. *Mistress is the amazing one*, she thought. *Not me...*

“Although I suppose I can’t blame you for not listening to advice from a devil,” Levi said. “No worries. I just wish you’d take a bit more care.”

“What do you mean?” Aisha asked.

“I mean that you were sleeping right in front of that doll, even wanting to share a bed with it. And you let yourself be drawn into an impossible battle alone.” As the implication of Levi’s words dawned on Aisha, a blush crept into her cheeks. The battle was one thing, but the affair with the doll had been Aisha’s secret. Levi grinned like a true devil. “Oh, but you *were* such an adorable thing, weren’t you!” she said. “Worrying yourself until you were red in the face about whether or not you should invite him into the bath with you...”

“H-H-How do you...?!” Aisha stammered. Her face was quite red now.

Levi’s smile took on a sadistic edge. “Then, you would make up your mind to part ways with him and storm out of the inn, only to realize that it was still the middle of the night and go marching right back. Did you even notice the strange

looks the people at the inn were giving you? You were quite careless, you know.”

“Gh! I...! You were watching?!”

“Of course I was! I was protecting you! I was watching when you asked him to pat you on the head, all embarrassed, and I was watching the whole time he was hand-feeding you sweets!”

“N-No!” Aisha cried. “I just did that because Izuna told me to! I-I wasn’t just giving in to the temptation or anything! I swear!” The devil vanished like she was fleeing from Aisha’s voice. Aisha felt so embarrassed she could practically die. Even as she went on shouting her excuses, there was no sign of Levi.

“That Aisha...” Levi said to herself, outside the reach of Aisha’s senses. “If something were to happen to her, it might just send Mistress on a rampage. I wonder if she’d destroy the world.”

‡

“All right, Levi,” said Nacht, her voice drained of all emotion. “This is it. Any last words?”

Levi’s carefree demeanor was gone. Her shoulders were shaking with fear as she was bound in place by a dragon made of pure light. A ball of condensed mana was floating in the air above Nacht’s hand, ready at any moment to turn to a violent attack. “W-Wait!” the devil protested. “C-Calm yourself, Mistress! You aren’t seriously going to use the *Ars Draconis* in a crowded city, are you?” If Nacht were to cast an *Ars Draconis* spell with the amount of mana she had gathered, it would reduce a city twice the size of Euto Fia to ash.

“Do you think this is a joke?” Nacht asked. “I told you, didn’t I? That I’d *kill* you if you laid a hand on my Aisha.”

Her body bound by her glowing restraints, Levi fervently shook her head. “Nooo! Have mercy! That was just...you know! It was just a greeting! It’s normal for us devils to greet each other with a kiss on the cheek. Didn’t you know?”

“What, like the French?” Nacht shot back. “Then how come you’ve never greeted *me* like that, hm?” Levi went silent. For a while, the two leered fiendishly at each other, overlooking the city from the roof of the clock tower.

“You have quite the cruel streak, don’t you, Mistress?” Levi said. “If you were watching the whole time, can’t you just be glad that I saved her life?” This time, it was Nacht who fell silent. “Aisha was perfectly safe with me around. *Mine* wasn’t the hand seeking her, was it?”

“Of course not,” said Nacht. “That much is obvious.”

“Oh,” Levi said. “Of course not.” Her attempt to rattle Nacht had failed.

“I’m giving you another job, Levi,” said Nacht. “As punishment for touching Aisha.”

Despite Nacht’s rough handling, Levi smiled delightedly and nodded as she received her orders. “Oh!” she said. “*This* job is a little more to my liking.”

And with that, the two figures vanished.

“Come on!” Aisha cried, frantically combing her surroundings. “Miss Levi! Where did you go?! I swear, it wasn’t what you think!” But no matter how hard she looked, she saw no one in the open space or the back alleys. Her humiliated voice echoed quietly through the streets, the sound swallowed up by the worn-down wood of the buildings.

Maybe it was because of the noise she was making, or maybe it was simply still beyond Aisha at her current level to sense her mistress when she had deliberately made her presence faint, but Aisha didn’t notice that Nacht was there until she was right in front of her. “Ah!” she cried, swallowing loudly as Nacht simply looked at her.

Nacht eyed her beloved servant up and down, from her hair, bright like the sun, to the big, round eyes that made her look so much like a cute little animal, wet and trembling as they blinked up at her. She looked over her slender body, dressed in her black-and-white maid outfit. She looked unreal, like some kind of illusion. A tremor ran through Nacht as she suppressed her desire to immediately reach out toward the girl.

Aisha looked up anxiously. Nacht wanted nothing more than to give her a great big hug, but after the mistake she had made, she simply couldn’t. She had sent Aisha away according to her own whim. How would Aisha feel about her

showing up again just as suddenly? Her body wouldn't move. She tried to speak, but no words came.

Finally, in a faltering, uncertain voice, she managed to say something. "H-Hey, Aisha! Long time no see!" She had lost her nerves. That was the best she could manage. Aisha was right in front of her, no more than a single stride away, but the distance might as well have been infinite. It was like they were separated by an impassable chasm.

"Mistress..." Aisha whispered under her breath, too quiet for an ordinary person to hear. Nacht, however, could make it out clearly. It was Aisha, saying her name. "Mistress Nacht!" she cried, closing the distance between them with no hesitation at all.

They had been apart for a matter of days, but now, to Nacht, it felt like the blink of an eye. All of the warmth she had lost that day came crashing back. Everything had felt wrong and uncertain, but with Aisha by her side, Nacht felt like she could at last be herself again.

"I..." Aisha said. "I...!" Her throat was quivering so much that it was a struggle for her to even speak.

"You fought well, Aisha," Nacht said. "I should never have been so cold to you. I'm sorry." Nacht meant those words from the bottom of her heart.

"No!" Aisha protested, her voice full of regret. "Mistress...you were right. I was acting like a child. I could tell it wasn't real, but I was just too weak to resist..."

Nacht shook her head. "That's not true, Aisha," she said, a bittersweet smile on her face. "I'm the one who was weak. I was too afraid of what you might say to take even one step, but you took the time to think, and worry, and hurt, and move forward all on your own. Between the two of us, I'd say you were *much* stronger."

Nacht had no intention of making excuses. She had behaved terribly—jealous of an illusion, drunk on her own foolish pride, and afraid of what Aisha might choose. Deep down, she felt absolutely pathetic.

And yet... *And yet...*

As long as Aisha was by her side, Nacht could do anything. That, she believed wholeheartedly.

“You belong to me, Aisha,” Nacht said. “That hasn’t changed. I should have never sent you away. I just got swept along by my emotions. It was horrible of me. Do you still want to stay by my side?”

Aisha looked up from where she had buried her face in Nacht’s chest. Her eyes were wet with tears. “Everything that I am belongs to you, Mistress,” she said. “My body and my heart. That’s what I swore to you, and I’ve never once regretted it.”

It was the most welcome sound Nacht had ever heard, finer than any orchestra. Her heart felt full to bursting with joy. She held her precious servant in a tight embrace, fighting to keep from shaking.

“Welcome home, Aisha.”

“I’m home, Mistress.”



The clouds passed overhead as the sun moved across the sky. For many long minutes, maybe even half an hour, Nacht held Aisha close, taking in every inch of the body she hadn't seen in so long like she was trying to make up for what she'd missed. Then, finally satisfied, she released Aisha from her arms. Aisha had tried to break free several times, but Nacht had refused to let her go until now. Aisha stood panting, her shoulders heaving.

Nacht, of course, had merely been investigating Aisha's body to make sure that nothing was out of the ordinary. She didn't trust Levi for a second, and needed to look with her own eyes to make sure the devil hadn't done something untoward to her beloved servant. It was her duty as the girl's mistress, after all.

"Well, it looks like you're in one piece," Nacht said. "What do you say? Ready to put an end to this ridiculous dream?"

"Haah... Haah..." Aisha struggled to breathe. "M-Mistress..." she said, looking up apologetically. "May I ask a favor?"

"If there's anything you want—" Nacht began, but Aisha cut her off.

"I-I'm sorry!" she said. "I know it's not my place! But—"

Nacht held up a hand, stopping her. "That's not true," she said. "That's not true at all! Listen, Aisha..." Nacht could no longer contain the emotions welling up in her chest. She beamed delightedly. "I love doing things for you! You should ask me for more favors! More and more and more and more! I want you to come to me! I want to spoil you! I'm not going to refuse to grant you a favor!" Nacht's words brooked no argument. They were absolute. "So tell me! What's this favor you want?"

"There's someone I want to save..." Aisha began.

Nacht listened to Aisha's story, about both the pain her friend was in and the determined battle she was fighting. "She reached out to me when I was hurting," Aisha said. "This time, I want to be the one to reach out to her."

Nacht smiled. It was a cheerful smile, like old times. "This dream's coming to an end," she said. "That much is settled. And when it does, that girl will lose her reason to live. Solitude is hard to resist and painful to live in, so you go show

her how lucky she is to have you as a friend. Beat it into her skull if you gotta. Make her realize how important the bonds between living people are.” Nacht had nothing but respect for Aisha’s decision. She decided to do everything she could to encourage her.

“I don’t know if I can be as confident about that as you...” Aisha said. “But I’ll do my best!” Aisha’s quiet voice was full of determination.

‡

The two moons shone in the darkness, casting their red and blue hues over the land. The night was still. Too still, it felt, even for death. The peerlessly elegant and sturdy frame of Estoll Castle, with its drawbridge and towering gate of enchanted steel, stood in the very center of the night-wrapped capital city. Nacht flew over the gate, past a number of spires and fortress walls, and alighted upon the king’s inner palace. Immediately, the center of reality seemed to shift. The grand, magnificent castle, which seemed like an embodiment of nobility itself, became nothing more than a backdrop. It was as if only Nacht herself was illuminated by the light of the moons—as if the whole universe orbited around her.

Estoll had prepared countermeasures against flight magic, but had less security against someone like Nacht, who flew on actual wings. She laughed as she dodged past a few anti-air traps, avoiding the line of sight of the guards on patrol and slipping into the palace.

Nacht cast her eyes over the hallways, which were lined with soft carpet. She smirked to herself. This was far too easy. Back in the game, invading someone’s home was no laughing matter. Magic traps that could detect intruders were common, as were poison needles launchers hidden in room decorations. Nacht felt a bit foolish for having been so on guard. It had seemed possible that invading this place would have put her in real danger, but Nacht could sense nothing worthy of giving her pause.

“This place seems kinda shabby for being their home base,” Nacht said frankly. She had been worried about the possibility that she would be stepping into a guildhall from Real World Online, in which case infiltrating it on her lonesome would be an impossible task. Alarms would sound, automatically

detecting the presence of an intruder, and she would be left to face a tidal wave of guards. Instead, she saw only a scattering of stern-looking armed guards. Nothing she couldn't handle.

Nacht sent the dutiful guards on a little trip to dreamland as she walked past, heading deeper into the palace. Soon, she reached her destination: a particularly conspicuous grand doorway, gray and imposing, that led to the royal audience chamber. She placed her hands on the heavy doors and pushed gently. Despite her slender arms, Nacht was a character who had nearly reached the level cap. Her basic abilities were more than enough to force the door ajar with ease, and it gently swung open. It was dark inside. Nacht stepped forward, toward the faint light she saw deep within the room.

The floor in the audience chamber was made of polished stone tiles, decorated with a rose-patterned carpet and lined with circular pillars to complete the effect. The room had an unsettling atmosphere that grew stronger with every step Nacht took into it. There was a low staircase leading up an elevated platform on which stood the empty throne, decorated with gold. Above it was the crest of Estoll, a golden lion. It was quite the lavish room. Just seeing it with her own eyes was worth the trip. Nacht, however, had other plans.

The ornate chandelier overhead glowed dimly, illuminating the dark room and masking another light source—a floating orb. It was concealed under a cloth decorated with the crest of Estoll and hidden from sight with high-level illusion magic, but Nacht's Dragon Eyes spotted it easily. The glowing orb itself was a truly fantastic sight, its colors shifting like an aurora, but what truly drew Nacht's attention were the images reflected within the orb. Beneath its brilliant surface flashed images of worlds that once were, now vanished beneath the sands of time.

Nacht saw the hidden realm where the dragons lived. She saw an ancient castle where the dead wandered to and fro. She saw a mechanical city where dolls and humans lived side by side. She saw an ancient magic kingdom, and a city of alchemy built in a barren desert. She saw a city in the sky, a pirate fleet on the great sea, and the ruins of a civilization swallowed by the waves. She saw the entrance to a cave buried beneath deep snow drifts. She saw the peak of a

sacred mountain inhabited by giants. She saw a world above the skies and the angels that lived there, and she saw devils falling into the bowels of hell. She saw a secluded garden, hidden from the outside world, and a tower that marked the time in solitude. She saw a great fortress city—the first. And then, finally, for just a fleeting second, she saw a castle, shining with colorless light.

A melancholy smile crossed Nacht's face. "Hah..." she said. "I wonder whose memories these are. There's something nostalgic about them." Then, she gathered her mana into her hand and dispelled the illusion. She reached out toward the orb that had shown her all those visions. It had been a long time since she had seen such a thing.

Suddenly, there was a harsh sound unlike anything Nacht had heard since coming to this world. A ball of blue light, like a comet, came hurtling at her at supersonic speed. Nacht glanced in its direction and wondered idly for a moment if she should dodge or deflect the attack before swatting it away with her own dark mana.

"That belongs to my papa, you know. No touching, please," said a voice. It sounded young, but it was full of quiet menace. The short figure staring at Nacht from the shadow of one of the pillars, too, looked for all the world like a very young girl. Her big, round eyes glistened with a dim light. Her hair was a brilliant, eye-catching scarlet, and nearly as long as the girl was tall. Her presence, however, was far greater than her childlike body would suggest. Her keen killing instinct couldn't possibly have belonged to a child. It was enough to take a mortal's breath away—close in its terror to death itself. This girl was something far, far beyond human. She might have been the strongest, or second-strongest entity Nacht had met since coming to this world. She was certainly more powerful than the fire dragon. She was at least on the same level as Alhazred the storm dragon, if not even higher.

And yet, her terrible presence was not nearly enough to intimidate Nacht. Nacht turned slowly to look down at the girl and sighed loudly. "What's this?" she said. "A lost child?"

"No, I'm *not*!" the girl snapped. "I'm not a little kid! Don't treat me like one!"

"Hey there, little girl," Nacht teased. "Would you tell me your name? Do you

know where your mother is?”

“I said, cut it out!” the girl shouted. “I’m an adult!” Despite her objections, she sounded every bit like a child throwing a tantrum. Nacht laughed.

The girl was wearing a deep blue cape over a dark combat outfit that exposed a fair bit of skin and had a crimson brooch around her neck. Nacht recognized both as Legendary-tier equipment, but what really drew her attention was what the girl was holding. “Is that a Black Cross?” Nacht asked. “That’s quite the dangerous toy for a child.”

There was no mistaking it. The Black Cross was an Ancient-tier double-gun-class weapon, but it was hardly a rare item. It was reliably craftable in-game, after all. Nacht had seen it many times before. Still, it was a high-tier item with power far eclipsing an ordinary weapon, meaning that the girl also had the stats required to wield it. If she landed a solid shot, it could potentially inflict a serious wound, even on Nacht.

“Who are you, anyway?” the girl asked. “How do you know the name of the weapon papa gave me? It’s obvious you’re no ordinary person. You spotted me despite my Fairy Stealth ability and deflected my attack like it was nothing. How did you do that?”

“The name’s Nacht,” Nacht said. “But you can go ahead and call me your bestie, I guess?” The answer to the girl’s second question was simple enough. Her stealth was simply no match for Nacht’s Soul Search ability. She’d had plenty of warning that the girl was about to attack.

“I’m Erin Ayren Scarlet. You can call me big sis.” Erin floated up into the air, gazing down at Nacht.



“Pfft!” Nacht spat. “Ah ha... Ah ha ha ha ha ha! Y-You... You want *me* to call *you* big sis? When you look like *that*? Bwa ha ha! Well, okay! If that’s what you want, Big Sis Erin! That good?”

“Why, you!” Erin shouted pointing one of her guns at Nacht. “I’ll wipe that grin off your face!”

Nacht’s mocking smile didn’t dwindle in the slightest. “Whew...” she sighed. “Hilarious. But I suppose I should stop laughing and continue our conversation.”

“Don’t make light of me! I’ll kill you times a hundred!”

“So, Erin,” Nacht said, moving on to the main topic on her mind. “I’ve got a question for you. Whose Guild Orb is this?” Her voice suddenly sounded imperious as her aura of overwhelming power swelled forth.

Nacht was merely a common member of her guild, Outer Cafeteria. She had no need to keep a Guild Orb in her possession. Guild Orbs, after all, were items used by guildmasters to manage their guild halls.

Nacht looked up at the glowing orb, making it clear what she was referring to. “I have to admit, though,” she continued, her eyes flashing like flames. “You came up with a pretty absurd way of using one of those things. If its owner knew what you were doing with it, I can’t imagine they’d be pleased.”

Erin, however, did not respond at all how Nacht had expected. “Guild...Orb?” she asked, frowning and cocking her head. It was clear she had no idea what Nacht was talking about. Silence fell.

“Don’t tell me...” Nacht said after a moment. “You’ve been using this thing without even knowing what it is?”

“Of course I know what it is! It’s...um...you know! One of those things! If you find seven of them, you can make a wish?”

“Let’s not go there,” Nacht replied. Erin, whose explanation had hardly been an explanation at all, seemed like she agreed with the sentiment.

“Nhh...” she mumbled. “Well, anyway, papa gave it to me. He told me that if I was ever lonely, I should use it and think of him. And when I tried it, I saw papa, just like he used to be! But I don’t know what this thing *is*. How would I?”

Nacht was taken utterly aback. Her legs suddenly felt weak. If she hadn't still been on her guard, she might have bowled over on the spot from the revelation. But as she thought about it, her confusion turned to a kind of awe. And suddenly, she understood. Nobody who knew what a Guild Orb was would have used it this way. Its original owner must never have imagined that its power had such an application. Nacht would have never considered it if not for Tina's turn of phrase spurring her thoughts. "I see..." she said. "Incredible. I'm not sure if I should scold you or just laugh. Either way, this charade needs to end. I'm sure that's what your father would want as well."

"What do you mean?" Erin asked.

"A Guild Orb is a common item. It didn't originally have such an incredible power. It has three general functions that you can use to create and manage a guild hall: fabrication, management, and recording. That's all it's supposed to do." The Guild Orb's power had clearly grown from when it was an ordinary item in the game. To be more precise, it had been unfettered. The game's logic was not in effect in this world. Rather, everything seemed to work the way it was described in the game's flavor text. Nacht had undervalued the Guild Orb in the context of reality. "The feature you've been using—or rather, the ability your father taught you how to use—is called the Memory Zone."

Real World Online stored its world and managed the player characters' data on its infamously powerful and vast network of servers. Every action a player took was recorded and logged, from their first fight against a monster to every quest they finished. There were records of every friend a player made, every guild they founded, and every raid boss they defeated. If they got married in the game, there would be a record of that too. Every last one of the players' memories. Naturally, the devs had prepared ways for players to relive those memories themselves. One of them was the Memory Zone, which was accessible through the guildhall.

Players who belonged to a guild, as well as players the guildmaster chose to give permission, could relive their pasts through the medium of screenshots or recorded movies. They could even share their memories with a friend if they so chose. It was an incredible accomplishment—truly a next-generation data management system. Recording a movie would be one thing, but the true

achievement of the system was the ability to directly call up whatever information you liked given specified parameters. It was a wonderful power, just as Tina had said. And it was the power that had enveloped the whole city in an illusion.

With that missing piece, everything fell into place. The strange sensation Nacht had felt when she'd first entered the city was the notification a player got telling them they were entering a hostile guildhall. Nacht had felt it before when intruding on territory managed by rival guilds. It was meant to warn players and give them an opportunity to turn back. In the game, a system message would have appeared as well, but in this world, it was nothing more than a strong premonition.

Memory Zone could be applied to the whole area under a guild's control. In this case, all Erin would have had to do was designate Euto Fia as the area associated with the Orb, which there were two ways to do. One was to conquer the area as one's own, and the other was for it to be offered up by its present ruler. The conspirators must have chosen the second option. By the time of the king's wife's rumored resurrection, Euto Fia must have already been placed under the dominion of the Guild Orb. That was the beginning of the dream. Hence why Nacht had come straight to the king's home.

"Your one issue was that the Guild Orb's power affects everyone in the area equally. That quality, at least, doesn't seem to have changed." The only differences were the targets of its power and the use of intermediaries. Analissia's dolls had still been showing people their memories from the past, just as surely as when Nacht had used the Guild Orb to look at old images or videos. Without the restrictions imposed by the format of the game, anyone within the area of effect who had a strong wish could see their past reflected in a doll. It wasn't, it turned out, a malicious power. It was simply being used without any understanding. Aisha had never done anything wrong.

"You ought to be ashamed," Nacht scolded Erin. "This power is meant to be for making precious friends. Didn't your father entrust you with the Guild Orb because you're precious to him?" He must have bestowed the power to replay memories from the past to his daughter because he knew how lonely she would be without him. That was why he had given it to his family but taught them

nothing about its many versatile uses.

“Who knows?” Erin responded, clearly conflicted. “Despite what you might assume, papa could be rather irresponsible sometimes. But I would rather prioritize my family who might still be alive over memories from the past. I don’t have any regrets. But Rinoa’s missing, and I can’t do this without her. Plus, now *you* have those troublesome eyes of yours on us. Maybe it’s time to try another approach...”

“Did you say ‘Rinoa’?” Nacht asked. “Red hair? Single horn? Kind of a brat?”

“Wait, do you know her?! Rinoa is my niece! The whole reason I gave that woman the Guild Orb was because she told me she could use the power of the Demon Eyes to free Rinoa from her seal, but by the time we found her, the seal was already broken! The whole thing is seriously getting on my nerves.”

“Yeah...” mumbled Nacht, thinking about that spell she had cast before she’d realized how truly vast her magic power was. “Sorry about that.” Thinking rationally, it only made sense that the grandfather who’d given Rinoa her Real World Online equipment was the same person as the father who’d given Erin hers. “But you don’t *look* like a demon...”

“I guess I just take after my mom,” said Erin. “But that doesn’t matter. Is Rinoa all right?”

“She’s so all right that she started a war as soon as she got free. I had to chastise her a little for that. Wouldn’t want your cute little niece to develop bad manners.”

“I can’t believe we didn’t notice...” Erin said. “I guess everyone was busy at the time or just didn’t want to interfere. But those are all excuses.”

Nacht looked up at the Orb shining high in the air. “So,” she said, “I suppose that Orb belonged to your father and Rinoa’s grandfather, the man named Renji Shinohara?”

“Y-Yes, that’s right.”

“I see!” Nacht said cheerfully. Then, she leaped into the air and grabbed the Orb.

“Hey! Give that back!” Erin said, pointing both of her guns straight at Nacht’s heart. Cold mist, filled with the power of death, flowed out of the barrels as they prepared to fire.

“Hang on,” Nacht said. “There’s just something I wanna check.” Nacht only knew of two demon player characters who also served as guildmasters. One of them was someone she knew personally. She had to know for certain if it was him.

Nacht touched the Guild Orb and looked for the name of the guild. However, she was not a member of the guild in question, let alone the guildmaster, so all she could access was its public information. That, however, was enough.

“Hah!” Nacht laughed. “Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! I see! So *that’s* what’s going on! I guess it’s fate after all!” She looked again at Erin, smiling with sudden fondness.

“Wh-What are you...?” the girl asked.

“Tell me,” said Nacht, “does the name xXxEvil_AngelxXx mean anything to you?”

“‘xXxEvil_AngelxXx’?! What an atrocious nom de plume! I simply *refuse* to believe that’s someone’s actual name.”

Unfortunately for the poor girl, that name belonged to none other than her father, the guildmaster of the Rainbow Bridge guild. In a sense, he was Nacht’s father as well. It was he, after all, whom Toru had commissioned to design Nacht.

‡

As rude as it might be to say, the members of Nacht’s guild, Outer Cafeteria, were not so much *content* with their offline lives as they were *oppressed* by them. The result, however, was not much different—most of them were too busy with family and the like to participate in the Christmas event. Only Toru the university student was left alone, hunched over his desk and staring happily at the VR headset screen on Christmas Eve.

“Damned ingrates!” stormed xXx_EvilAngel_xXx over voice chat. “Ignoring the guildmaster’s orders like that. I ought to have the lot of them expelled!”

“Hey, don’t say that!” protested Toru. “Their wives are on their side of the screen, you know.”

“They still shouldn’t go back on their word!” xXx_EvilAngel_xXx declared, his character’s red, fire-like hair fluttering lonesomely in the breeze. “How can you stand it, Nacht? Knowing that while we’re fighting the event boss, all those reality junkies are spending Christmas Eve doing the old in-and-out?! Haah... I’m just about at the point of asking *you* on a date.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re turning into one of Nacht’s admirers too...” Toru said. “At the very least wait until the voice changer is on to start flirting with me.” He didn’t know how to handle advances like that with his natural voice coming through the chat.

“Grr...” xXx_EvilAngel_xXx grumbled. “All right, I’ve made up my mind. I’m gonna design another girl. One for me to use as a sub-character.”

Other players gathered in the event waiting area, a snowy field with a single cedar tree in the middle. Toru’s avatar Nacht grinned broadly, determined to take their mind off their worries. “Good luck with that,” she said. “But first, we have a boss to deal with. We finally have a full party. You ready?”

“Just you wait!” xXx_EvilAngel_xXx bellowed. “Death to reality junkies!”

That day was far in the past now, but Nacht could still remember the way his voice echoed.

‡

Playing a demon character in Real World Online was a stupendously difficult feat. Most NPCs in the game were hostile to demons, making it a challenge many attempted but few could overcome. Toru had lost two demon mains before finally, with the help of his entire guild, succeeding in reaching the level cap on his third attempt.

Few people chose “demon” as their character’s species, and even fewer earned the rank of guildmaster. Nacht was aware of only two, only one of whom was a man: the guildmaster of Rainbow Bridge, a guild whose members all seemed to be freakishly good at visual art. They had everything from animators to traditional artists to doujin creators among their ranks. It was like

a trade exhibition for all of Japanese culture. And the one who had gathered them all was their guildmaster, xXx_EvilAngel_xXx, a professional illustrator.

Toru had made his acquaintance by chance one day. Toru gave the guildmaster some advice for leveling his character based on Toru's own experience from leveling his demon main. As thanks, when Toru was working on Nacht, xXx_EvilAngel_xXx offered to do the character design for him. In a manner of speaking, it was no exaggeration to call him Nacht's creator. Nacht's beautiful features were his objet d'art before Toru had brought her to life with an infusion of capital in the real-money shop.

I guess there's no way he'd go around calling himself xXx_EvilAngel_xXx... Nacht thought. She looked over again at the girl pointing her guns in her direction. She did resemble her father, now that she knew there was a connection. She had his bright red hair and orange eyes full of unyielding spirit. *And I guess he did end up with a wife on the other side of the screen! Who's a reality junkie now?*

"Sorry," Nacht said, slipping the all-important Guild Orb into her extra-dimensional storage. "Looks like I can't call you big sis after all."

"What do you mean by—" Erin began. "Wait! What are you doing?!" With ownership of the Orb claimed temporarily by Nacht, she could stop the Memory Zone effect whenever she chose to.

"This thing has caused enough trouble," Nacht said. "I'm taking it. Or so I'd like to say. I'm a magnanimous demiwyrm, though, and Aisha's battle is going to take a little while yet. In the meantime, Erin, why don't we play a game? I'll take a handicap, of course. If you can land even a single attack on me, I'll give you the Orb back." Those were Nacht's conditions, and they were final.

"That's quite the attitude to take with one such as I," the girl shot back. "Papa was the only one who could ever defeat me, you know." Potent mana welled up in her small body as she prepared herself for combat. Her scarlet hair flickered like flames.

"Come, then," Nacht said. "Show me the power he entrusted to you."

No sooner had the words left Nacht's mouth than Erin fired both her guns. Their black-colored barrels turned red, and they released two bullets of raging

fire. They would be easy enough to dodge, but if the splash hit the luxurious carpet, the whole room would go up in flames.

“Didn’t your parents teach you not to play with fire indoors?” Nacht said, invoking the power of the water dragon to swallow up the two bullets. The attacks canceled each other out, filling the room with hot steam. *A dual gun user who favors elemental attacks*, Nacht thought, taking Erin’s first volley as an opportunity to analyze her abilities.

“I suppose I don’t know any better,” Erin grinned. “I’m just a child, after all!” She only acted like a child when it was convenient for her, Nacht noticed.

“Here,” said Nacht. “Let’s take this somewhere else. *Ars Draconis: Doom Tempest Dragon!*” Suddenly, a powerful wind arose. The immense power of Nacht’s magic easily swallowed up Erin’s entire body, flinging her through the roof of the palace and into the sky.

Erin, however, was not to be so easily bested. Despite the disorientation, she fixed her guns’ sights on Nacht and pulled the triggers. There was the sound of a barrage of shots as another volley of bullets came Nacht’s way. They were in the air now, though, and Nacht could dodge to her heart’s content without any worry about collateral damage.

Perhaps she should have worried more. The bullets sailed past, whistling through the air and shattering the stone pavement below. Black Cross was an Ancient-tier weapon—even Nacht had her hands full dealing with its firepower. The throne room, which had taken the brunt of the attack, hardly seemed usable anymore. Nacht pretended not to notice.

The two flew even higher into the sky, Nacht on her dragon wings and Erin on fairylike wings that shone with the colors of the rainbow. They came to a stop in midair. Here, these two monsters could unleash their power without a concern in the world.

“You want my full power?” Erin said. “Well, don’t blame me if you die! *Load Cartridge! Starshot... Fire!*” The night sky was filled with a shower of lights streaking across the darkness, each one a deadly bullet. There was the sound of explosions that rumbled and echoed again and again as more and more beams of crimson light appeared, chasing unerringly after Nacht.

Nacht was overjoyed. She had hardly seen such a splendid display of firepower outside of bullet hell games. She spread her wings and released her magic, vanishing just before one of the sinister rays of light struck her, leaving only an afterimage to be pierced by the shot.

“Stop scurrying around, you cockroach!” Erin shouted. Nacht took a brief moment to appreciate the implication that those black menaces existed even in this world before Erin, who had underestimated Nacht’s speed, began activating more of her abilities. “*Combat Mode Shift: Lightning Bullets!*” she declared, looking carefully down her sights. Nacht watched the milliseconds pass as Erin pulled the triggers. “*Fire!*”

The very instant the shots went off, Nacht simply twisted her upper body out of the way. It was like she could see them coming before they were even fired. The bullets zoomed past her like a streak of light and vanished harmlessly into the sky.

“No way!” protested Erin. “*Reload... Full Fire!*” There was a flash like lightning. A score of bolts shot from Erin’s guns, like the heart of the storm itself. Her first strategy had been to try to overwhelm Nacht with the sheer number of bullets. Her second had been to raise the speed of her shots as much as she could. And now, she was trying both methods at once. Nacht, however, wasn’t watching the bullets. She was watching Erin, predicting her shots, leading them one way and then evading. Dodging bullets was one of Nacht’s specialties. She had spent wholly unreasonable amounts of time training with her friends in closed spaces, dodging wholly unreasonable numbers of projectiles. Erin wasn’t about to overcome her evasion ability just by making her bullets a little faster.

“*Phantom Wurm,*” Nacht said, invoking a skill. Her form flickered, then vanished.

“Huh?!” Erin exclaimed. “Are there more of her?!” In fact, there were not. What Erin was seeing was nothing more than afterimages. Between Nacht’s natural agility and the boost from her skill, she was now faster than Erin could follow with her eyes. “In that case, take this!” the girl said, preparing another ability. “*Guidance of the Fairy King!*”

This was the first Nacht had heard of that ability, but Erin’s movements gave

her a pretty good idea of what it did. The barrels of Erin's guns were pointed ahead of Nacht's trajectory, waiting for her. It was as if she could see where Nacht was about to be. Her ability must have been one that let her see into the future.

Erin's barrels lined up perfectly. She grinned, assured of victory, like a fisher waiting patiently for a fish. "*Sixfold Demon Shot...Set!*" A set of six guns appeared behind her, bright red and seeming to move with wills of their own. Each one was as long as Erin's entire body. All of them were pointed at Nacht. "*Load: Ruin Bullets! Fire!*"

As Erin pulled the triggers of Black Cross, the living guns behind her fired their own bullets—although, speaking honestly, they were more like artillery shells. Each of them was affected by the unique enchantment of her Ancient-tier weapon: Absolute Aim. Its effect was simple. As long as the bullets were fired, they were guaranteed to hit. In the game, even if you turned around and fired in the direction opposite your target, the bullets would curve through the air and hit their mark. There was no escape, whether you took to the sky, went underground or underwater, or even fled to the opposite side of the continent via fast travel. It was a shot that could not be dodged. Even if Nacht made off to the very ends of the world, those bullets would pursue her. That was why Erin felt so assured of victory. After all, the only thing *she* had to do was hit Nacht a single time.

But if she thought such a simple trick would be enough to hit Nacht, she had another thing coming.

"Still taking me lightly, I see," Nacht remarked. Erin had forgotten one thing: Nacht knew the name of the Black Cross. Therefore, it stood to reason that she would know its abilities as well. It wasn't impossible for Nacht to be taken by surprise, as Sakura had once done despite her lower level, but as long as Nacht knew what attacks were coming, she had no shortage of countermeasures. "*Milia Draconum Sacramentum...*" Nacht uttered, her voice sounding oddly melodic. Those were the words of absolute power. They echoed, heavy and strong. And then, Nacht began her counterattack. "*Enhance Spell! Ars Draconis: Atomic Ray! Now go!*"

A small dragon of light appeared on the palm of Nacht's hand. It spread its

wings, then seemed to vanish. A second later, it darted silently forward like the thinnest beam of light. It was hardly a showy attack at all. The light dragon was a shy creature, after all. The only sign of its passing was the clash of light it left in its wake. The Atomic Ray struck the demon bullets directly, blasting them into pieces.

“What?!” Erin said, stunned. “I... I don’t believe it...”

“An unavoidable attack, guaranteed to hit your target,” Nacht said. “But the bullets it fires are slow. They’re not hard to shoot out of the sky.” The broken fragments of the bullets were just as unerring, but all they could do was dirty the frills of Nacht’s dress, Night’s Embrace. She dusted them off with an air of undeniable superiority. “We still have some time,” she said. “Wanna keep going, Erin?”

Erin simply glowered in silence as a cloud drifted in front of the moon. It was no wonder. From that poor girl’s perspective, it was like the final boss had suddenly shown up in the middle of town. Not that Nacht felt the least bit guilty for it, though.

Chapter 6: The Power of Love

The splendid, luxurious manors of the noble town of Sharron stood before the royal castle like knights ready to protect their liege. In the middle was a grand park, large and scrupulously maintained. This was the home of the nobility of Estoll.

A group made a beeline for the gate of one manor in particular. They battered down the heavy metal door carved with intricate patterns and headed inside, their weighty footsteps resounding.

“So you came,” Analissia said coldly. “I won’t bid you welcome, but I have been waiting for you, I suppose.” Unsurprisingly, she seemed less than pleased by her guests. The tone she’d adopted was one of superiority. She was no longer even trying to play the role of a kindly big sister.

“Where is Izuna?!” Aisha demanded.

“Don’t be rash,” Analissia said, taking her tone in stride. “No one likes a hasty woman, you know. But I must say, this is quite the party you have going. Frankly, I’m surprised to see *you* alive, Tina. You should have died when you destroyed the Marionette Heart I gave you. Tell me, how did you manage the trick?” Analissia was speaking calmly, but her stern displeasure was plain to see on her face.

Tina, though, felt like she was the one who had cause to complain in this situation. A mixture of anger and sorrow came over her. “Ghh...” she sobbed, hanging her shoulders. “This is all your fault! I’m going to be Nacht’s slave for the rest of my life! Where exactly am I supposed to find three hundred platinum?!”

Analissia cocked her head. She had no idea what Tina was talking about.

What had happened with Tina’s heart? And how had she ended up teaming up with Aisha? To answer that question, we must return to a little while in the past...

“It’s about time,” Nacht said. “We’re splitting up. I’m going to bring this dream to an end while Aisha pays a visit to her friend’s house.” She sounded oddly mournful about it.

“I’ll be lonely without you...” said Aisha, a shadow crossing over her face as well for just a moment. “But I need to save Izuna! I can’t let that woman have her way with her!” They would only be separated for a moment, after all. It wouldn’t be long before Nacht would come to meet Aisha, a smile on her face.

“I see...” Nacht said. “Then first, let’s meet up with my slave.”

“Y-Your slave?!” Aisha exclaimed. “M-Mistress! D-Did you get a s-sex slave while I was away?!” All sorts of wicked imaginations were filling Aisha’s mind. Nacht smirked at her reaction.

“As if,” she said. “Let’s just say she’s someone I’m *working* like a slave. It’s quite convenient, let me tell you.”

Nacht led Aisha to a large church with a dragon emblem emblazoned above its door. It seemed a fitting place for Aisha’s mistress. This was where Nacht had spent her time while the two were separated.

“Oh! It’s Nacht! Welcome back!”

“Welcome back!”

“Play with me, Nacht!”

A horde of happy children greeted the pair when Nacht opened the door. They pulled on her arm, jumped up on her, and clung to her legs as she entered. Aisha scowled. For a split second, she was filled with fury that anyone would behave so familiarly with her mistress. It felt unfair.

“Ha ha ha,” Nacht laughed. “Back off for a second! Is Tina here?”

“Sister?” one of the children answered. “I think she’s in the sanctuary.”

“I see. Good kid.” Nacht patted the child gently on the head.

“Nacht, who’s this girl?” another child asked, prodding Aisha. “Is she a new sister?”

“I am not!” Aisha declared. “I’m not a child! And besides, I’m Mistress Nacht’s servant!” She may have been no taller than the children around her, but Aisha was nearly twenty years old. Legally, she was an adult.

“A child servant?” one of the children asked.

“Tiny servant!” another echoed.

“Flat-chested servant!”

“I-I’m not a child!” Aisha insisted. “And that last one is just *asking* for a fight!”

“The servant’s angry!”

“Run!”

“Run while you can!” Aisha shouted. “I’ll teach you to fear an adult’s— Weh! M-Mistress?” She stopped when she felt Nacht’s hand touch her shoulder.

“Aisha is my partner,” Nacht said. “She’s precious to me. And her name’s Aisha, not ‘servant.’ Understood?”

Aisha’s heart instantly filled with joy. She blushed furiously, but still couldn’t help smiling happily.

“Now,” Nacht went on, “I need to see Tina. You kids be good and play with the golems in the meantime.” The children obediently dispersed.

“Golems?” Aisha asked. She had noticed that the orphanage was full of armored knights standing by to protect the children, maids to play with them, teachers to give them lessons, and even combat instructors to teach them swordsmanship. It was a much more complete staff than one would expect of an orphanage in a church, but they seemed oddly unnatural as they played with the kids. Aisha thought she could guess what was going on. Common sense seemed not to apply when her beloved mistress was around, after all.

“I had some time while I was waiting for you,” Nacht said. “I suppose I decided that there are good uses for dolls after all. Now the kids have plenty of partners to play with them. Besides, these kids all spent time with the one and only Nacht Schatten. Their futures are guaranteed to have great things in store.”

Aisha laughed at Nacht’s cocky turn of phrase. *Mistress is Mistress, after all!*

she said to herself, looking up at her kindhearted but capricious mistress with loving eyes. Then, a thought crossed her mind, one she couldn't get out of her head. If Izuna, imprisoned and bound in her misery as she was, had been the one to meet Nacht instead of her, surely she would have been the one saved instead of Aisha.

As Aisha was thinking, she and Nacht made their way to the church's sanctuary. "Nacht!" said the woman who stepped out, casually greeting the demiwurm. "You're back!" In her ceremonial vestments, Tina looked far more grown up than Aisha, especially when it came to her chest. She was an attractive young adult who still had her youthful charm. Aisha felt a strong sense of unease as she regarded the new girl.

"M-Mistress?" Aisha blurted out, without really meaning to. "D-Do you not...need me anymore?" She couldn't compete with Tina—especially when it came to her chest. Worse, Aisha's sensors were telling her that Tina's breasts hadn't even finished growing.

"Excuse me?" Nacht asked.

"I mean..." Aisha went on, "Look at her! With a s-sex slave like that, you won't have any use for my flat chest, will you, Mistress?!"

"*Excuse me?!* " Nacht and Tina blurted simultaneously.

"Wh-Wh-What in the world is this girl *talking* about?!" Tina demanded.

"*Sniff...*" Aisha started to sob. It didn't seem like she would stop any time soon. "I can't believe it! I look away for a moment and my mistress has fallen prey to a harlot! At least give half of your chest to me!"

They had only been separated for a brief time, but it had been more than long enough to make Aisha feel uncertain of her place. Seeing this beautiful young lady converse so casually with Nacht had made her absolutely manic with anxiety.

"No, Aisha!" Nacht said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called Tina my slave. She's really just a regular old acquaintance."

"An acquaintance?!" Tina protested. "That's just mean after what you did to me."

Tina certainly hadn't meant any ill, but her words were like adding fuel to the fire of Aisha's imagination. "*Wh-What you did?!*" Aisha exclaimed. "M-Mistress! What did you do to her?!"

"I told you, it isn't like that!" Nacht protested. "Jeez, Tina. Think about how you phrase things next time." She sighed deeply and set to dispelling Aisha's misconceptions. She began by explaining how she'd met Tina and detailing the fight that had broken out immediately after.

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"Gwah!" Tina gasped as Nacht's hand pierced her chest all the way through to her heart. "What—?!" she said, but that was all she could manage. Perhaps due to the arm that had been shoved through her chest, she was finding it incredibly difficult to speak. Nacht's pale skin was stained red with Tina's fresh blood, but she didn't stop there. Her hand took hold of the Marionette Heart in the girl's chest and ripped it out in a single motion. "Aghhh!" Tina cried, coughing up blood as Nacht quickly retrieved a potion from storage.

This was no ordinary potion. This was the highest quality healing potion Nacht had—a Special Potion. They were purchased from the game's real-money shop. Nacht kept a few hundred on hand for raid bosses or special events.

Real World Online was designed with several mechanisms to prevent players from endlessly spamming healing items. Potions came with cooldown timers or side effects. Even if they had them on hand, most players would avoid using more than one or two potions unless they were in truly dire straits.

Nacht poured the potion on Tina's wound. The effect was immediate. As soon as the liquid touched the gaping hole in her chest, the damaged area began to glow with a soft light. It was like time itself was flowing in reverse. Before she knew it, Tina's chest was as good as new, and not just on the surface. Her agonized breathing eased. The impurity had been exorcised from her body. Even her lost blood was quickly replenished. And most importantly of all, to Tina's great shock, her missing heart had somehow regrown. She felt it beating in her chest, just like it used to do.

Tina blinked, uncomprehending. "What...?" she said. "How...?"

"Let's just say I wanted to see what that potion does in *this* world," Nacht

said. “Looks like it properly restored all your missing body parts.”

“Ah ha ha...” Tina laughed giddily as she looked up at Nacht with unfocused eyes. “So you were using me as an experiment...” It was like she was dreaming. No magic in the world could restore a missing heart. If Tina had merely suffered a mortal wound to the heart and immediately received care from a high-level priest, it was at least possible that they could cure her, but Tina’s heart had been absent for almost a month. And yet, there it was in her chest, beating once more.

Nacht shook her head fondly. “Well, Tina,” she said, “you’ve been saved. It went well too, if I do say so myself. Now, let’s talk price.”

“What...?” Tina said, bewildered.

Nacht grinned. “I used a very rare, very precious concoction to save you, you know,” she said. “I might never get my hands on another one of those things. You may be a priestess with the church, but you don’t think I’m going to give you that potion for *free*, do you?”

Nacht wasn’t lying. Once upon a time, that potion may have cost a mere three hundred yen, but in this world, it was a very precious thing. She might never see another one—aside from the ninety-nine she still had in storage.

“I-I... B-But... Please!”

“Your wish was for me to drive away the demons, restore the city to its proper form, and put an end to the war, right?” said Nacht, smiling with feigned innocence as she bore down on Tina.

“Y-Yes...” Tina said. “B-But I don’t have much money...”

“Well,” said Nacht, “I’m not unreasonable. I’m the one who decided to use the potion, after all. I’ll give you a discount.” Tina swallowed. Perhaps there was some hope for her finances after all... “I believe I remember a case of a potion being sold for three hundred platinum in Estoll,” Nacht went on. “It was said to be a panacea that had cured a prince who was mortally wounded in a training accident in the blink of an eye. The potion I gave you was much more potent than that one, of course, but never mind that.”

Incidentally, two gold coins was the average yearly salary paid to a knight. As

a priestess supported by the church, Tina's income was about the same. The church had done very little for her since she was granted the title of Dragon Priestess. She could make more working as an adventurer.

One platinum was worth ten gold. It would take thirty years for her to pay back such an enormous sum.

Tina collapsed, coughing up blood for some reason despite having *definitely* been healed already. "P-Platinum..." she muttered, looking up at Nacht like her soul was actively departing her body. "Th-Three hundred..." Truly, she had sold her soul to a devil.

"Hey, no worries!" said Nacht, grinning playfully. "If you don't have the money, you just gotta work for it!"

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"And so," Nacht concluded, "Tina's gonna be my slave until she's done three hundred platinum's worth of work."

"I-I see..." Aisha said, looking well and truly embarrassed. "I can't believe I jumped to conclusions like that..."

"I can't believe you used me as a human guinea pig..." Tina said, shivering.

"Don't worry!" said Aisha, smiling with relief. "Mistress is a kindhearted person. It'll be okay!" Aisha meant those words. She knew that money—even on the scale of platinum—meant very little to her mistress. She was certain that Nacht was simply using the pretense of debt to get Tina to listen to her requests. But it would be a lie to say that Aisha had *no* source of anxiety. "But if you're some harlot thinking to repay Mistress with your body, *you had best beware!*"

"N-No! Never! I mean...we're both girls!"

"Then there's no problem!" Aisha chirped, beaming cheerfully at Tina like the matter was settled.

"I don't really need the money anyway," said Nacht. "I'd much rather you spend it on making sure all those kids have good food to eat. So, Tina, you'd better work for it. You can start by showing Aisha the way to her friend's

house.”

Tina knew the place well. It was the mastermind’s home base—the one she had invaded only to be broken and defeated. Nacht herself had other plans, but Aisha would need assistance. That was the reason she had introduced her to Tina.

“W-Well, in that case, of course! Leave it to me!” Tina immediately busied herself collecting her armor and sword, but Nacht gave her a quizzical look, stopping her.

“You’re just there to show the way, Tina,” she said.

“Huh?” Tina said, suddenly feeling very confused. “B-But we’re attacking the demon woman’s mansion, aren’t we?”

“No,” said Nacht. “Aisha’s going to see her friend.” Tina looked at her, utterly puzzled. “Well, either way, the hard part’s gonna come after everything’s over.” Nacht nodded to herself, seemingly convinced of something the other two didn’t understand. Tina and Aisha cocked their heads curiously to the side.

“All right,” Nacht said, not explaining anything. “I should get going. Good luck on your end, Aisha. I believe in you.”

And so, as if guided by fate, the two had come here. An invisible force was seemingly holding their hands.

“Where is Izuna?!” Aisha repeated.

“Haah...” Analissia sighed. “I just can’t have a calm conversation with you, can I?” With shockingly little resistance—so little that Tina and Aisha were momentarily taken aback—she gave way. “Izuna is in the room in the far back. Do as you wish.”

Aisha didn’t know what to make of Analissia’s words. The last time they had met, Analissia had been so determined not to let Aisha get close to Izuna that she was prepared to kill. What could have caused this sudden change?

“I’m not stupid enough to try to lay my hands on you,” Analissia said. “Do as you wish. If Izuna decides she would rather be with you, I won’t stop her.”

Analissia was being extremely cautious when it came to Aisha. “Ah, but I do have a request. If Izuna does go with you, tell her one thing for me,” she said, and she gave Aisha a message in a voice utterly devoid of emotion.

Aisha was stunned. She nodded her head and ran off through the house. When she was gone, Analissia turned her gaze to Tina.

“That went terribly,” Analissia said. “Or rather, it was going quite well until something completely beyond my ability to handle decided to involve herself. There really wasn’t anything I could have done.” Even if she had known ahead of time, she simply didn’t have a winning move. There was sorrow in her voice. “And yet, there are still things we can do to salvage the situation. Will you help me, Tina, priestess of the fire dragon? You love this land as much as I do, do you not?”

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Tina felt a shiver run up her body. What could the demon woman possibly have to say to her *now*? “Wh-What do you mean by that?” she asked, keeping a sharp eye on Analissia. She was in a ready stance, prepared to draw her sword at any time.

Analissia gave an undisguised sigh of exasperation. “Humans can be such idiots,” she said. “Why don’t you try doing your own thinking for a change? In all that I have learned of the world, I have found no ‘justice’ that lacks ulterior motives and no evil deed done without cause. I wanted you as a tool. Or to be more precise, O priestess of the fire dragon, I wanted the title you hold.”

Tina glared at the woman across from her with poisonous fury. She couldn’t stand the way Analissia spoke, as if they were discussing no graver matters than their plans for tea.

“But it didn’t work,” Analissia continued. “The curse of domination failed to take hold, and you refused to obey me even at the cost of your own life. So now, as a last resort, I am going to ask you honestly for your help.”

Next time, try doing that first! Tina wanted to say, but kept the quip to herself. “Why would I ever listen to you?!” she shouted, trying to dispel the unease building in her chest. “Don’t you understand what you’ve been doing?!”

“What I’ve been doing?” Analissia asked, taking Tina’s hostile words with an air of aloof displeasure. She spoke slowly, letting her words sit in the silence of the room. “I suppose you could say I’ve been putting my hobbies to a practical application. What about you, Tina? What have you been doing? The priestess of the fire dragon is the pride of Estoll. You say you love this small, backward country, but what have you done for her?”

“I...” Tina faltered.

“Well, never mind,” said Analissia, cutting her off. “Let’s change the subject. Were you taught to treat your possessions with care when you were a child? I certainly was. Of all the things I was taught at that age, it was the only wisdom of any value.” Tina had no idea where Analissia was going with this. She listened silently. “Tell me, Tina, were you aware that all living things exist to struggle from the moment they come into this world?”

At that moment, two dolls arrived from elsewhere in the house and stood next to Analissia. One was a man approaching middle age who still had the physique and posture of a much younger man. The other, hanging off his arm, was a woman whose hair shone like bright golden thread. “These things used to be my mother and father,” Analissia said. “Although now, I am afraid they are nothing but dolls.”

“Y-You—!” Tina gasped, stunned with disbelief. She could wrap her head around the fact that Analissia had turned her own parents into two more of her dolls, but how could she calmly and dispassionately put them on display as if they were nothing more than worthless toys? It was as if she had no humanity in her whatsoever.

Tina’s body shook. She wasn’t afraid of violence, but something in the deepest, darkest depths of her heart filled her with a terror she couldn’t explain. Having been raised in an orphanage, she had never known her parents, but there was a priest in the church who was something like a father to her, and she saw the other children as her brothers and sisters. She loved her family dearly—more than her own life. How could Analissia be so unaffected when telling her how she’d turned her own mother and father into dolls? How could she pridefully call her own parents “things”?

“The male doll has a secret...” Analissia said, turning her attention to the doll that used to be her father. “Most of the time, it hides it underneath its bangs, but you can see it if you look closely. Here.”

Tina looked and saw a scar on the doll’s forehead. It looked like something had been cut off of there. “A horn...?” she guessed.

“Precisely. You call me a demon woman, I believe? I suppose I can’t blame you. I slipped His Highness some information to lead him to that conclusion in order to lure you to my mansion, but the truth is that only half of my blood is demonic.”

“No way...” Tina said. “You’re...human?” Of all the revelations so far today, that had been the most shocking. Tina had seen Analissia as a cruel, tyrannical demon who held the city in the palm of her hand—a dictator leading Estoll into an unwinnable war.

“Don’t be rude,” said Analissia. “Well, no matter. I will tell you everything. Please listen and try to understand. And then I will ask for your help.”

Could Tina and this monster really see eye to eye? When she’d finished listening to what Analissia had to say, what compromise would she ask her to make? Could Analissia talk Tina into agreeing with her point of view?

Uncertain of everything, Tina listened to Analissia’s story.

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The strongest memory Analissia had of her early life, when she was first beginning to develop a sense of self-awareness, was from three years after her birth when she’d caught sight of her mother making love to a man. Her mother’s sinful behavior, her wanton moans, were forever seared into the young girl’s mind.

Analissia’s mother was a noblewoman of Estoll. Her father, meanwhile, was a commoner so lowborn that even his hometown was unknown. What her father *did* have, however, was an absolutely extraordinary talent for magic, which her mother refused to be denied. The two were wed according to her wishes, and between them, Analissia was born. As a noble, her full name was Analissia Rainfiel.

Analissia's father's magical aptitude was second to none in the kingdom of Estoll. He was made a court wizard in the blink of an eye, and became their chief in only a few years' time. But that was all to be expected. After all, Analissia's father was not human.

Analissia's father was none other than a succubus from the continent of demons, dispatched to infiltrate the human world as a spy—the first of the invaders to reach Estoll. He didn't have much in the way of loyalty to his mission, but his prowess at seducing women and ingratiating himself with people of all sorts made him ideal for the role.

Analissia could still remember words she'd heard during her childhood. They echoed in her memory like a proclamation of doom.

“You’re very lucky, Analissia. One day, you’re going to grow into a woman worthy of your father...”

“When you become a woman, your father will show you the height of pleasure...”

Those words had been enough for Analissia to deduce the true nature of her parents' "love." They filled her five-year-old heart with dread. The day she'd come to understand what those words meant, she'd immediately hurled the contents of her stomach out onto the floor. The burning pain in her throat and the disgusting sensation inside her mouth were seared into her memory even today. What her parents had said to her marked the beginning of the first struggle of Analissia's life. Her time limit was five, maybe six years—the onset of her first menstruation. She would have to kill her parents within that time, using any method at her disposal. If she failed, not only would her body be sullied, but worse, she would end up like her mother. She would lose her very capacity for thought and be reduced to a mere shrieking toy. That frightened her more than anything.

She was afraid. So, so, so, so, so, so, so, so, so afraid. But still, Analissia resolved to fight. She studied magic with an obsession that bordered on madness. She learned every scrap of knowledge she could get her hands on, stole forbidden grimoires, and even polished her combat techniques and mastered martial abilities. And one day, when she was past ten years of age,

her father stole into her bedroom, only to be caught and killed by one of her traps. Analissia used her abilities to turn her father into a doll, and sent him to kill her mother in turn.

“Ah ha ha ha ha... Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Eee hee hee! Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” She laughed. For the first time in her life, surrounded by her parents’ freshly spilled blood, Analissia laughed from the bottom of her heart. She gazed fondly at her two precious dolls. Finally, at long last, she was free. For the first time in her life, she was truly free.

But that alone was not enough to bring Analissia peace. Suddenly, she heard a voice. “What’s this?” it said as a shockingly young and gloomy-looking girl appeared in front of her. “What happened here?”

This girl was one of the hated and reviled ancient demons spoken of in humanity’s most terrifying legends, an ancient and mighty wellspring of demonkind. She was a real demon—a being of a higher order than Analissia. Her name was Lady Scarlet, and the blood of the dead Lord of Calamity flowed through her veins.

“Oh?” the girl said, spotting Analissia. “Did *you* kill him? Hm... Well, no matter. Starting today, I’d like you to please kindly fill in as his replacement.” Despite her words, it didn’t seem to be an offer Analissia was allowed to refuse. Once more, she found herself wishing she were dead.

And so Analissia obtained another face: that of the demon woman Analissia Reigen.

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“I believe you asked me if I understand what I’ve been doing?” Analissia said. “If you must know, I have been acting as a mediator between demonkind and humanity. That is all.” She spoke without emotion, as if to tell Tina that she had no sentimentality for what had happened in her past.

“I don’t believe it...” Tina muttered. “An ancient demon... I thought they were fairy tales...”

Since long before Analissia became the prime minister of Estoll, a nation of demons had existed in the shadows of the world. Up until today, Tina had been

wholly ignorant of this fact of the world.

“The ancient demons, a mere legend?” Analissia asked. “Absurd. As much as you may wish to deny reality, they certainly exist. The simple study of history should make that clear enough. They were subjected to cruel persecution by humanity and made to be scapegoats for the horrors of the world. They were robbed and their prosperity was eventually brought to an end. But although the Order of the Elect teaches that they were utterly exterminated, the truth is different. The ancient demons left their area of control and fled to the south, to the other side of the continental divide.”

Analissia spoke with factual coldness. As much as Tina hated it, her words made sense.

“Well, then,” the prime minister went on. “Have I given you enough hints yet? By your face, I would say you still do not understand. Then let us continue. What do you suppose the demons who were driven out of the human realm have been doing for the past two thousand years?”

Tina swallowed audibly. It was like a nightmare was flashing before her eyes. Among all the stories Tina knew, the ancient demons were spoken of with the most horror.

“They have been sharpening their claws,” Analissia continued. “Claws to gouge out the throats of their most hated enemy. And soon, the age of humanity will come to an end.”

The ancient demons were said to hold power on the scale of the dragons. If that power were brought to bear for the sole purpose of revenge against humanity, there was nothing ahead for them but devastation. The situation was worse than Tina had imagined.

“Th-Then I was right...” Tina said. “You’re here to destroy us...”

Analissia, however, laughed uproariously at Tina’s words. “Pff! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! You truly are an idiot. Didn’t I tell you that I am half human? I was not raised as one of them. I never learned to hate humanity the way they did, nor do I feel any particular sympathy for the ancient demons. If anything, I would say that humanity of the present day is the wiser and stronger race.”

“So then why?!”

“Isn’t that obvious? Humanity faces a future of persecution at the demons’ hands. Between the two, which would you side with?” Here, too, Analissia’s speech was dispassionate and matter-of-fact. “Personally, I’ve decided to treat my own possessions with care. I refuse to even consider letting someone take them from me. Estoll, my position as nobility and prime minister, this mansion, my life of luxury, the dolls I have made... I do not wish to have them thrown away.”

It didn’t sound like she was lying. But that just made her actions even more confounding. “But *why*?!” Tina demanded. “You’ve done all kinds of cruel things, haven’t you?! Turning the king into your puppet, trapping the people in their own dreams, even what you did to me!”

“I did those things because I had to, of course,” Analissia answered. “Who do you think the demons see as their greatest enemy in this world? Obviously, it’s the Order of the Elect, the religious organization responsible for their persecution. Therefore, my first objective has been to eliminate the Order of the Elect by taking away their promise of salvation and putting an end to their practice of brainwashing the masses through their schools. To that end, I replaced some particularly useless politicians, gathered the capital I needed, and created the special development zone. The phantom dolls were a byproduct of that effort. At first, Belseirre and Izuna were enough, but unfortunately, their power is not well suited to controlling the masses. As such, I decided to use the laborer dolls I had made to build the special development zone as pleasure dolls as well. Although I must say that *most* people awaken from their dreams the moment the dolls are out of sight. The majority of them remember the encounters as actual dreams as well, so I don’t believe it’s causing any major problems.”

Tina stayed quiet, letting Analissia finish her explanation.

“Humans fear what they don’t understand, hence the necessity of religion. But the Order’s doctrine of human supremacy and their persecution of demons are not acceptable. Rather than a god created by the whims of humanity, I would prefer that we worship beings that actually exist. Humanity needs a new religion, Tina. And for that, I need you.”

“What about the invasion of Sindoria...?” Tina asked.

“That was not by my will,” said Analissia. “But am I wrong for doing as my superiors tell me? I do not wish to die, and perhaps doing this can help curry favor with the demons. The land that is now Sindoria was once governed by the demons of House Grimwall, you know. If they can retake even a part of it, perhaps it can improve relations between humans and demons in the future.”

“And Aisha’s friend?”

“I keep her on hand in case I suddenly need the firepower. Of all the people in this kingdom, there are four whose talents make them especially useful tools: Izuna; the chief court wizard, Reanna; Gyria, the most despicable man in the assassin’s guild; and you, Tina, priestess of the fire dragon. I needed the nobles and knights and powerful merchants as well, of course. After all, if the country is not in order, our power will be lessened. When the time comes that we must fight, do you wish for us to waste our strength squabbling?”

Tina could think of no more questions.

“Even if this world becomes one ruled by demons,” Analissia went on, “I intend to do my best to ensure that Estoll remains peaceful and undisturbed. For that to happen, we must learn to be good neighbors to them.”

“B-But—” Tina protested.

Analissia sighed in annoyance. “You still refuse to understand? You’re naive, girl. You and all the rest. I swear, I am at the end of my rope dealing with your helpless idealism. Do you really think life is so simple?! I’ve done horrible things, you say? Of course I have! Each and every one of us is engaged in a struggle for life, for privilege, for everything that we have! If you are foolish enough to think that you can avoid that struggle, you will simply be preyed on! If you wish, you may deem me evil and strike me down in the name of justice. But what then? Our politicians will return to bickering, our countrymen will fall into poverty, and the Order of the Elect will once more be allowed to operate within the city. And you say *I’m* the one here to destroy Estoll?”

Tina glowered, but said nothing.

“Now, Tina, the choice is yours.” Analissia held out her hand. There was still a

great distance between the two of them, but somehow, it felt like Analissia was right beside her. “Cooperate with me. If you do, we can ensure the safety of Estoll.”

“I...” Tina hesitated. Analissia had been fighting for a long time against something Tina didn’t fully understand. And what had *she* been doing? Analissia’s question echoed in her ears, denouncing her. Tina had obtained a certain amount of power and rank, but she had been moving through the world without ever considering it. How had she never noticed that before?

But what *had* Tina been doing? That was clear enough. She had been protecting the small happiness of her family. That was a cause for which she was prepared to throw away her life. In fact, her conviction had gotten her killed not once but twice now. She made up her mind.

“I can’t cooperate with you,” she said plainly. “I-I know I’m an idiot, and I can’t understand difficult concepts. Even if I involved myself in politics like you or His Highness, I probably couldn’t do anything useful anyway. I was wrong to try to attack you simply for being a demon, but the way you do things is wrong. I know that much, if nothing else.”

Tina had no idea what was true or right, but at the very least, she could live by her own principles. Even if she said they were necessary, Analissia’s methods left victims in their wake. Tina herself aside, if Analissia were ever willing to sacrifice Tina’s precious friends in the name of necessity, Tina would cut her down in an instant.

“I see,” said Analissia, accepting Tina’s answer. “That’s a pity, I suppose. In that case, I believe it’s time for me to take my leave. Farewell, Tina.” The two dolls began to move, setting Tina on guard. Rather than attacking, however, Analissia turned her back on the dragon priestess.

“Huh?” Tina didn’t understand.

“I do love this country,” Analissia mused, “but there is nothing more for me to do here. Therefore, I will take my leave. Please take care of things while I’m away. I would hate for you to regret my absence.” With that, the doll dressed in a butler’s uniform scooped Analissia into its arms, and all three vanished from sight.

Disoriented, Tina slowly released her grip on her sword's hilt. "Come to think of it, Nacht told me my only job was to show Aisha the way..." Her voice sounded lonely as it reverberated, then vanished in the empty room. "S-So, is this the end? What do I do now...?" Was this really what she wanted? Tina thought as hard as she could, wracking her paltry intellect for all it was worth. In the end, there really was just one choice.

"I have to get stronger." Now that Tina had been told the truth, that was the only thing she could resolve to do. No matter what else happened, if the dangers Analissia had spoken of were to threaten the people she loved, Tina would have to be strong enough to strike them down. Tina clenched her fist tightly with resolve. Maybe she was an idiot. Maybe she was a fool. Maybe she was a tiny, insignificant creature. But she would do what she could.

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Shrieks and wails. The sound of screams and explosions. Firestorms and blizzards clashing in the sky. The pungent, overwhelming stench of blood and sweat and flesh.

"Ahhh...what a wonderful smell." It was the nostalgic smell of a battlefield. A lone figure stood observing the clash between Sindoria and Estoll, an inhuman smile on her face. She was far from human indeed—in fact, she seemed to delight in this taste of hell on earth. Levi spread her arms wide like a lover, the corners of her lips twisting even further upward in joy. Then, she wrapped her arms around her own body, shivering as if to suppress her excitement. This time, she was glad to have done as she was told.

"Now, let's begin." Levi activated her unique skill, False Idol. The next second, the battlefield had been transformed. What was happening was no longer in human hands.

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Forced into a position of total defense, the Sindorian army created an encampment on defensible high ground. The Estollian army had advanced on their position, led by the vanguard of dolls in black with support from their magic battalion. The rest were in reserve, defending against a possible attack on their supply lines.

The two sides vied back and forth, gaining and losing ground, as terrible magics clashed in the sky, filling the world with fire and ice.

“Circle of Flames!”

“Frozen World!”

The sky was divided in two as the destructive forces rained down on the armies below.

The chief court wizard, Reanna, in command of the dolls in black, grumbled with frustration. “Tch. That girl’s a damned headache...”

For her part, Krista felt the same way. Reanna’s magic had stopped her spell from freezing the enemy dolls solid. “Yuri,” she snapped. “Kill that woman.” It was rare for her to raise her voice in anger.

“And how am I supposed to do that?” protested Yuri. Between the endless battles and constant night assaults, and with tireless dolls as their opponents, hardly anyone in the Sindorian army was in good fighting shape. In fact, hardly any of them wanted to fight at all. Morale was low. Defeat was near at hand.

As Krista reflected on the state of affairs, something appeared in front of her. “Wha—”

A second later, everyone else could see it as well. It wasn’t just Krista. “Huh?!” they all shouted.

Silence fell. A silence so profound that time itself seemed to have stopped. Whether from shock or simple bewilderment, everyone seemed to be at a loss for words. Nobody made so much as a sound.

Krista was the first to regain her senses. She smirked. “It seems the dragons are on our side after all...”

The soldiers who were meant to be clashing swords with each other and even the mindless dolls all stood dazed, unmoving. Krista couldn’t believe that she could have seen such a thing on a battlefield at all, let alone two times in her life.

It appeared from a dark cloud that stretched far, far out of sight—a manifestation of eternity itself. Its body was covered in scales, flowing like the

currents of the ocean. It had four supple limbs that ended in sharp claws, and a horn that seemed to reach to heaven itself. There was no doubting it. This was a dragon.

How long had the enormous creature been there? In fact, *why* was it there? It didn't seem to be one of the four great dragons, but Krista's senses were telling her that it easily outstripped even the fire dragon she had encountered in the past.

"I-Is that...?" Yuri's voice was shaking. "Krista, we need to retreat!"

"No." Krista shook her head. "I don't sense any hostility." That was Krista's intuition based on her experience of being on the battlefield when the fire dragon had appeared. Besides, how would they even retreat from such a thing? And to where? How could they possibly resist the being before them?

"We can't count on that! We need to give the order to retreat immediately or else—"

"Yuri, calm down! I don't think it's an enemy!" Somehow, Krista could just tell. The dragon was unsettling in the extreme and undeniably divine, but it had none of the blazing animosity Krista had felt in the fire dragon.

"Let's see!" the dragon said, its voice bizarrely upbeat. "Which of you am I allowed to break again? Only the black dolls? That sounds right, I think. Well, then, let's have some fun! *Maze Marine...*"

Suddenly, water began rising from the earth up to the sky. It started with a single droplet, but soon it was flowing upward, toward a single point in the sky. The dolls, too, were drawn up one by one into their prison in the air. Some of them struggled or destroyed themselves in great explosions, but nothing they did could breach their watery membranes and affect the outside world.

Eventually, the water collected into a single body—a miniature ocean floating in midair, so vast that it hung over the entire battlefield. Then it began to shrink, the deep blue ocean growing smaller and smaller. The dolls split apart under the pressure, making a horrible metallic sound.

The whole thing lasted only a few seconds.

Something fell from the sky with a dull plop. It was a small lump of metal—all

that was left of the dolls. The force of its landing buried it in the ground. It would be a long while before anyone noticed its presence.

“Is that it?” said the dragon. “Well, that’s a little bor—*inghhh?!?*” An enormous ball of fire, big enough to engulf the dragon’s entire body, cut off its words. The ground split open as jets of flame rose up to consume their foe, forming a circle of defiant fire.

“Don’t you think you’ve won!” declared Reanna, turning her attention away from her clash with Krista. “I’ll burn you to ash! I’ll use your body for spell components!” It was an act of true bravery. Even Krista found herself a little in awe. Hardly any human could launch a counterattack in such a situation. However...

“Ah ha ha!” the dragon laughed as the flames died down, leaving not a single scorch mark on its body. “You got me! Ahhh, I’d missed this sensation! This is what a battle is all about! Pretty strong too, for a human-scale creature. I feel just the slightest bit warm!”

“No...” Reanna fell to her knees in disbelief. And who could blame her? Her opponent was simply out of her league. Krista could only think of one being who could stand up to that thing. All a human could do was lower their head and beg for mercy.

“I hate to disappoint you,” the dragon said, “but *you*, I’m not allowed to break. So I’ll just have to knock you all out instead!” Everyone on the battlefield could clearly hear the words that were spoken to them. And then, just as the dragon said, they were out like a light.

As always, Krista was the only one who could follow what had happened. She’d heard a voice invoking a skill: *Force of Sin*. Then something ran across the battlefield, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Only Krista herself and the commanders of the two armies, Grascas and Margrave Reinholt, were left standing. Aside from them, every human on the field had collapsed onto the ground, unable to resist. Even Yuri had succumbed to the attack and fallen unconscious.

Krista had a sense that if Nacht were here, she would say that her level simply wasn’t high enough. Even standing before the thing in front of them took

considerable mettle.

“Okay, okay,” the dragon said. “What’s next again? Oh, right! In the name of the ancient dragons, I issue a proclamation to both countries: end this war and depart at once. Should you refuse...well, I think you know what’ll happen, right?”

Nobody had ever heard of a dragon interfering in a battle like this before. Nobody knew what intentions this creature had. But mere humans were powerless to disobey.

“Honestly,” the dragon muttered to herself. “A devil bringing an end to a war. I’ve gone pretty soft too, haven’t I...” Nobody heard those last words. There were only three people left standing, and they were all in shock over the sudden developments of the last several seconds.

“Oh, and one more thing,” the dragon said. “That one’s the girl named Krista, right?” Confused and dismayed to have been singled out, Krista nodded her head. “I have a message from my mistress. ‘Sorry I ended up meddling after all. I’ll make it up to you next time we meet.’ That’s all.” And with that, its enormous body vanished without a trace.

People said later that the war between Sindoria and Estoll was brought to an end by the ancient dragons, acting as the messengers of peace. Krista alone, however, knew the truth—that what had happened that day had come down to the whims of a single girl.

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Aisha walked quietly down the soft carpeted hallway, ignoring the house’s eye-catching decorations. She looked straight ahead, unwavering, as she made her way to her destination. In her mind, the only thing she could see was Izuna.

Aisha and Izuna’s bond had been born out of a mere coincidence. There wasn’t any deep reason behind it. There didn’t need to be. Aisha could remember Izuna extending a warm hand out to her as if it were yesterday. Aisha was beyond grateful. If it hadn’t been for that chance encounter, she would have never had the strength to move forward.

To be perfectly honest, this was far from the first time Aisha had come to

someone wanting them to be her friend. When she'd lived in the village, she had asked people to be her friend many times. Aisha hated being alone, after all. But every time, she would be met with a look of intense disdain. Then, they would force themselves to smile and offer Aisha their hand. Aisha was a strange girl. She had no friends who were willing to accept her as she was. They would play with her for a while, only to quickly grow to resent her presence. They made fun of her and ignored her, and in the end, she would go home alone.

Nobody had fun playing with Aisha. Nobody enjoyed speaking with her. They refused to smile when she was around. And at last, she understood. It all made sense. Aisha had never had any friends after all. She had been alone the whole time. She was left sad and empty, kicking rocks as she made her way home alone.

Izuna had been astonished, even perplexed by Aisha at times, but she took the girl's hand and held it gently regardless. Nobody had ever done that before. And when Aisha came to her with her troubles, Izuna listened and gave the matter serious, honest thought. To Aisha, the short time they had spent together was an irreplaceable treasure.

She wanted to see her again. She *would* see her again, no matter what.

Aisha stepped into the room and called out the name of her only friend in the world. "Izuna!" There was no response. Izuna's chambers were dim, illuminated only by soft candlelight. Aisha could see a canopied bed in the middle of the large room. Behind its curtains, she could see the shadow of a girl's face. There were two other figures on the bed as well—dolls. They were lifeless, their forms twisted, and they no longer spoke. A tear fell from the girl's eye and onto one of the dolls she was holding.

"I wish I'd never met you," Izuna said without lifting her head or even turning to glance in Aisha's direction.

"Izuna!"

"Go away!" Izuna shouted, her voice full of grief.

"Izuna, please, listen to me..."

"Go away! I don't want to see you ever again!" Izuna spat bitterly. She

cuddled fondly up to the dolls, resting her hands on theirs. “I was happy with mama and papa...” she said. “I was happy with my sister! I wish you had never come here...”

The two dolls must have been built to resemble Izuna’s parents, but now, they had lost their strength. Their faces were cold. But even so, Izuna clung tightly to them.

“I’m happy I met you, Izuna,” Aisha said. “You treated me like I mattered. I was really glad.” She spoke as gently as she could, but looking at Izuna all cloistered up in the fortress of her bed, she knew that it would take more than that. “But what you said just now was a lie. Izuna, you’ve been lying this whole time.”

“What’s that supposed to mean...?”

“What do you *mean* you were happy with your mama and papa?!” Aisha demanded. “What do you *mean* you were happy with your sister?! If you were so happy, then why did you run away to that spot every single day?!” The memory of Izuna sitting alone on the swing was still fresh in Aisha’s mind. She knew that Izuna had been deceiving her from the moment they’d met.

Izuna was in pain. She was suffering. And yet, she said nothing about her own problems. She asked for no help. But Aisha remembered the words Izuna had said when they’d first met. “*Nobody comes here. I can sit alone...play alone...think alone...cry alone...search for answers. But you’re alone too. So I’ll let you sit here...*”

True to her words, Izuna was trapped in profound solitude. She was alone in her secret place. Helplessly, hopelessly alone. Perhaps it was because of her family. And yet, there was no denying that she had wanted to be Aisha’s friend.

“If you weren’t alone,” Aisha said, “then we would have never met! So please, stop trying to fool me! I don’t want to leave you alone, Izuna! I *can’t*! So even if you hate me and tell me to go away, I absolutely absolutely will not! Because I...” Aisha took in a great breath of air and raised her voice even higher.

“Because I’m your friend!!!”

“Shut up.” Izuna’s quiet voice sounded more forceful than before. She rose from the bed. “Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, *shut up!*” She hurled the

pillow beside her with furious anger, aiming for Aisha's head. Izuna's calm demeanor was gone. Now, she was screaming with furious passion. "Go away, Aisha! Get lost! Don't you have some Mistress Nacht who's so important to you?! Then go to her! I don't need you! Mama! Papa! Make her go away!"

"Nh...!" Aisha exclaimed. The two dolls began moving toward her. They were fast—too fast for Aisha to evade. In that case, she would just have to meet them head-on. But even as the threat drew closer by the moment, Aisha's mind was clear. She had faced much more frightening opponents than this. That was what training was for, after all.

Aisha calmed her mind and opened up its deepest depths, allowing them to flow free. That was the most important fundamental of spirit magic. Spirits would not respond to a will imposed on them by force. A practitioner had to approach them honestly and meet them as equals.

"Wind, protect me!" Aisha held out her hand and a whirlwind appeared. But the male doll was not deterred. It thrust its fist through the barrier, impacting her hard. "Gwuh!" Aisha shouted. The whirlwind, as deadly as a blade, carved away at the doll. If an ordinary human had tried to strike Aisha, their arm would have been unceremoniously severed. But her opponent was a metal doll. It had no fear of the wind.

Aisha, though, had not intended for the whirlwind to simply stop the dolls' attacks. The spirits who had answered her call began to merge into one concentrated ball. There was a blast of wind. Aisha's will turned it into a veritable tempest. The dolls were sent flying and crashed into the wall with a clamor of grinding metal.

"Papa! Mama!" Izuna cried.

"No, Izuna!" said Aisha. "No, they aren't!" The words were painful, but they had to be said. That was what Aisha had learned. "Those aren't your parents! They don't bleed, they don't scream, they don't even speak! Izuna, your parents...are no longer in this world..."

"You're wrong! They aren't dead! They came back to life! They did!" Izuna screamed like a child throwing a tantrum, turning to face Aisha with empty eyes. It was impossible to tell where she was even looking, but the expression

on her face was one of suffering.

“No power can return the dead to life! If Mistress Nacht can’t do it, no one can!”

“Nacht again...” Izuna said. “I hate you, Aisha! I hate you! How dare you say such horrible things!” She raised her right arm and her mana began to surge, so dense and bright that space itself seemed to distort and undulate. “*Summon Celestial Armor—!*” Her voice sounded strained. She clenched her hand into a tight fist as if to seize the heavens themselves. Izuna’s mana erupted into the sky and changed shape, becoming a suit of armor and forming around her small body. It was metal and cloth and light and darkness all in one. It was unlike anything Aisha had ever seen. It looked like a dress and seemed to have a mystic presence unlike that of armor worn by common soldiers.

The house of Greenfield the Annihilator had another power in addition to the Demon Eyes: equipment magic. The power to materialize any weapon or armor that the caster should desire. It was a school of magic that required tremendous amounts of mana to use, making it perfectly suited to a family whose eyes could absorb mana from their surroundings.

“*Alter Arm,*” Izuna incanted, and the mana began to gather in her right hand, which glowed with blinding light. “G-Go away already...” she repeated in a faltering voice “I don’t care if it’s fake... I’m fine with being alone...”

Aisha shook her head. “I won’t. I won’t leave you alone, no matter what.” If she had been willing to go home with her tail between her legs just because Izuna threatened her with a somewhat strong power, Aisha would have never come here in the first place. “A servant of a dragon doesn’t go back on her word.”

“Dummy...” The mana gathered in Izuna’s arm shifted. Without missing a beat, she kicked off the ground, leaping forward faster than Aisha’s eyes could follow and leaving deep craters where her feet had been. A second later, she was on top of Aisha. “*Battering Ram!*” A torrent of power coursed through her small body and released outward. There was a sound like something impacting the surface of a body of water as Aisha’s delicate body went sailing through the air, smashing through the wall of the mansion. Izuna released a storm of attacks

against Aisha with such force that the floors and walls looked like they had been struck by bombs.

“Gah—!” Aisha coughed up blood as she went tumbling. But regardless of how much it hurt, she held on to consciousness. As she crashed through the wall, she conjured a barrier of wind to slow her momentum, but Izuna broke through it easily. She frantically entreated the water spirits for power, and her body was enveloped in a film of water, protecting her from impact. Even so, Izuna’s attacks struck with such ferocity that nothing she did could completely protect her. Before she knew it, Aisha had been knocked high into the air.

It hurts... she thought as she flew through the sky. *How strong is she...?* Then, she found her footing in midair on a line of flowing green light.

“Why?” Izuna asked. “Why wouldn’t you leave me alone before you got hurt?! I told you to go away!”

Aisha had experienced her share of solitude. It was something she knew deeply. She knew its pain. She knew how difficult it was to struggle against. She would not let Izuna be alone. “Please, just listen to me!” she said. “I’ve told you why, but you won’t listen! So now, I have to make you listen with force!”

The air was filled with Aisha’s wind blades. There was nowhere to run. The blades tore through the very walls and ceiling of the mansion. No matter how well Izuna could move, there was no way she could dodge a hundred blades of wind.

It didn’t matter. Izuna had no need to dodge. She didn’t move a single step. The stars in her eyes twinkled brightly, and Aisha’s desperate assault simply vanished. For all its immense force, Aisha’s spirit magic dissipated, turned to motes of light, and was absorbed into Izuna. Her mana glowed brightly, and the suit of armor she had conjured became visibly more solid.

“Give up,” Izuna said, but Aisha didn’t move. She stared, enchanted by Izuna’s eyes.

“The Demon Eyes of Exorcism...” Aisha muttered. The power to defy magic granted by Eupito, the god of evolution. When Aisha had asked her mistress about it, Nacht told her that she knew of powers that could nullify lower-level attacks they came into contact with, be they magical or physical. These powers

could only affect what they could touch. If Izuna's power was in her eyes, then it would only work on attacks she could see.

"Magic won't work on me," Izuna declared.

"That's not true," Aisha said. "Or at least, your power has limits." Suddenly, the ground beneath Izuna's feet gave way. The blades of wind had been nothing but a trick to draw her attention. Aisha knew that Izuna had an overwhelming advantage against magic, so she put on a dazzling display to keep Izuna distracted and looking up, ensuring she would stay rooted to the spot.

"Gh!" Izuna fell. The floor, the foundations, and even the very earth on which the mansion stood had been transformed into one of Aisha's specialty pitfall traps. The earth spirits laughed as she fell, satisfied with a job well done.

"Your eyes can change any spells they see into mana for them to absorb," Aisha said. "But that means you can't absorb anything you can't see. You aren't all-powerful, and you aren't a monster!" As if to prove her words, Aisha transmitted her thoughts to the spirits of earth. Lances of stone erupted from beneath Izuna. They came from the walls around her, unrelenting. Izuna had nowhere to flee. She couldn't even maneuver as she fell.

But when Aisha saw what was happening, her face went stiff. "What?!" The spears coming head-on for Izuna withered and crumbled when they came within her field of vision as expected. However, Izuna's back, where her line of sight couldn't reach, was protected by her suit of armor, deflecting the attacks harmlessly away from her. It reminded Aisha of the magic sword art Yuri had used against her, but even more powerful. Even deep beneath the earth, tormented by a hell of needles, Izuna didn't seem daunted in the slightest. Having finally landed, she took a step forward, perfectly composed.

That's not fair! Aisha thought, trembling. *That armor of hers is just cheating!* She had thought that she and Izuna were on equal footing, but Izuna, it seemed, was far stronger than anticipated. No wonder a demon like Analissia had wanted her. No wonder her power was so feared. It was overwhelming.

"It's hopeless!" Izuna shouted up from the pit. "You can't beat me, Aisha!" Her power welled around her like a thick, blackened shell. But Aisha could tell that despite her attempts to hide it, the poor girl was crying.

What should she do? How could she reach Izuna? Should she gamble everything and summon a greater spirit? Such a being could almost certainly overcome Izuna's eyes, but summoning one was not something you could do on a whim. The summoning site needed to be arranged in advance. It would take far too much time—more time than Aisha could buy on her own.

"And you'll never beat me if you keep running away!" Aisha shot back. In truth, those words were meant mostly to encourage herself.

"Change Equipment: Sandals of Pegasus!" Izuna's mana surged forth as if to ridicule Aisha's determination. In terms of pure volume of mana, neither Aisha nor Izuna seemed to have the upper hand. With a flash of light, white-winged sandals appeared on Izuna's feet and she rose into the air. *"Summon: Bow of Azure Sky!"*

A brilliant azure bow appeared in Izuna's hands. Mysteriously, it seemed to lack both a string to draw and arrows to fire, but when Izuna held her slender fingers where the string should be, the sound of a high-pitched chime could be heard. She grabbed hold of the empty space, and the string took form as a beam of light. A glowing magic circle appeared around Izuna, like a fixture point for a stationary turret. Izuna looked directly at Aisha and aimed.

"Aisha..." she said. *Please don't let this kill you...*

Aisha heard Izuna's quiet voice seconds before the shot was released. The next thing she knew, her entire world was submerged in a blinding white light.

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The vortex of light vanished and everything was gone. Izuna had nothing left. But that was only to be expected. She was a fake, after all. A liar. A fraud. This was the obvious outcome. It was so obvious that there was nothing more to be said.

Izuna had nothing. Ever since the day her parents died, she'd had not one single thing. It only made sense for this thing to vanish as well. Her father, her mother, her sister, and even her friend were all agonizingly far away, in a place she could never reach.

I wish we had never met...

If she hadn't met Aisha, Izuna would have never learned the truth. She could have lived her whole life never realizing how alone she was.

I wish we had never met...

If she had never learned what it was like to spend time with another person, Izuna might never have realized the pain of her solitude. She might have never learned what things could and couldn't be trusted.

I wish we had never met...

If only she hadn't learned what it meant to *not* be alone. Being together made her feel like she was a unique, precious being. It made her feel like she could break free from her prison of solitude.

But she had been happy.

Her father and mother had come back to life.

That was good.

Her sister was always kind to her.

That was good.

She didn't have any friends.

That was...fine.

It may have been fake, but without it, Izuna didn't know how to keep on living.

I wish we had never met...

Izuna's life had been like an act of a play. It didn't matter that it was fake, and Aisha had never *really* been on her side. It was Aisha's mistress who mattered to her, not Izuna.

Izuna was full of hatred—absolutely full to bursting. She hated and hated and hated with all her heart.

"I hate myself..." she said.

"I see," said Aisha. "But I love you, Izuna."

At first, Izuna thought the voice was a hallucination. But then, she saw her.

“H-How...?” Izuna gasped. She was certain she had blown the girl’s fleeting life to oblivion. Aisha’s dress was in tatters. She had bleeding wounds all over her body. And yet, she stood firm on her tiny legs, looking directly into Izuna’s eyes.



Even a casual glance would be enough to make it clear that the mansion had been utterly pulverized. The roof and ceiling had been ripped clean off, letting moonlight stream into the ruins. But still, Aisha stood. Her maid outfit was burnt beyond salvaging, and her body was covered in scales of darkness.

“It can’t be...” Izuna said. “Aisha, are those...Demon Eyes?”

Aisha’s eyes shone through the dust filling the air, two perfect circles of golden light. In the palms of her hands, she held what looked like shapeless light, the color of the night sky. “I’m sorry, Izuna,” she said. “I can’t control this power very well. It might hurt a little, but please try to bear it.”

Aisha stomped her foot loudly on the ground. Izuna could tell somehow that this gesture was a divine invocation. “*O exalted wyrm, I dedicate this offering to you,*” Aisha chanted. “*O king of night, master of death and rebirth, enter my body and give me strength...*” She stepped forward, dancing some sacred dance, and held her arms wide. Distance itself seemed to vanish. She circled around and around, her hands held in tight fists.

“Divine possession...?” Izuna said.

Aisha’s body began to glow with a dark light. It concentrated in her hands, shining like an omen of the end of the world. “Sorry. This is gonna hurt.” Aisha suddenly lowered her posture. Her body seemed to blur as she ran along the ground so fast it seemed like she was gliding. Her fingertips traced red afterimages as she closed the distance to her opponent.

“Gwah!” cried Izuna as Aisha’s attack tore effortlessly through her shining armor and sent her flying. She slammed against the ground with an agonized “Gh!”

Izuna wasn’t finished, though. She stood up and once again drew her shining blue bow. But she was too late.

“*Rise from the earth, O thorns of everlasting darkness! Descend from on high, O chains of bondage!*” Darkness followed Aisha’s invocation. Even Izuna’s feet were lost in inky blackness. “*Bonds of Eternal Night!*” Chains twisted around Izuna’s limbs, holding her fast in place.

“Nghhh!” Izuna strained, her Demon Eyes glittering with light. “Wh-Why won’t these chains vanish?!”

The chains, however, were not magic, but an adjacent skill. They were an ability spoken of in legend that priestesses of the great wyrms had used to seal away lesser dragons. Izuna’s gorgeous Celestial Armor and even the light of her Demon Eyes was swallowed up. Soon, she was in a world of nothing but darkness.

That was where the real attack began.

“No...” Izuna said. “What’s happening? My eyes...!” A shadow fell over Izuna’s Demon Eyes. She flailed desperately in her bonds, unable to tell right from left. Izuna had been inflicted with the status effect Blindness.

The true value of Bonds of Eternal Night was its ability to briefly inflict Blindness on a bound opponent. Aisha had already shown Izuna that her Demon Eyes were dependent on vision to function. If her eyes themselves were made unable to see, their power was effectively sealed. Nacht often neglected to use her special abilities, but dragon skills in principle could do just about anything from inflicting status effects to launching non-magic attacks. That was the true power of dragons and wyrms, and the reason they were synonymous in the game with physical attacks. They had all sorts of skills they could use depending on what the situation called for.

Nacht, however, had only the basic abilities she’d gotten automatically through leveling up.

Aisha had temporarily borrowed the merest fragment of her mistress’s skills and power, but it was enough. *Magic should work now*, she thought. But with the power of a wyrm flowing through her, Aisha was unable to use her spirit magic. “*Red Dragon Claw!*” Unable to move, Izuna was helpless to prevent her armor from being torn apart a second time. She was launched through the air and her white armor, formed from pure, concentrated mana, burst apart.

Freed from her restraints, Izuna glared furiously. “Aisha!” Her tattered armor glowed brightly once more and reformed itself. She took her bow in hand and aimed it at Aisha, drawing the string.

So it wasn’t enough after all... Aisha thought. Her powers as a dragon

priestess were close in nature to magic, and her one and only mistress was a magic specialist herself. It wouldn't be enough to stop Izuna, though. The golden rings around Aisha's eyes flickered. She stood facing Izuna, her mana rushing through her body.

The two girls' manas surged into the night sky. It was as if light and darkness themselves were facing off against each other. If she could have picked, Aisha thought, she would have liked to have been on the side of light. But no sooner had she had the thought then she decided that it didn't really matter what it looked like. That darkness was the power of her beloved mistress. Far be it for her to insult its appearance. It was a power that had only ever been shared with Aisha. It could even be gentle. It had saved Aisha, after all. And now, she would use it to rescue Izuna from her prison of solitude.

"Izuna!" she shouted back, doing everything she could to control her wild mana. Her will was iron, her determination unwavering. Even as the mana seemed poised to go out of control at any second, Aisha focused it into a spell.

Nacht had once told her that magic was just a word for techniques that manipulated mana, that as long as she could control the mana in her body, there was no need to bother with the nuances of theory. In that case, what she had to do was simple: believe in herself and her mistress, and draw forth her power. This was a spell beyond what Aisha could cast on her own.

Mistress...please lend me your strength...

A magic circle appeared on the ground at her feet. Lightning flashed again and again as terrible black storm clouds appeared in the sky. A raging tempest descended upon them. "*Ars Draconis... Falling Lightning!*"

"I told you!" Izuna said. "Magic won't—" She never finished her sentence. The twinkling stars in her eyes did nothing to stop the dragon of lightning.

Aisha hadn't known for certain that her plan would work, but she'd at least had a solid basis for her theory. A great spirit she'd once summoned had told her that she couldn't touch the dark power Aisha was now using. Even a being whose control over mana far outstripped any human could do nothing with it. Though Izuna could dispel and absorb the magic of the spirits, this power was far beyond what a human could manipulate.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” Izuna yelled, turning her shining bow against the dragon overhead. “Strike it down, Bow of Azure Sky!” The dragon, however, harmlessly swallowed the bolts of light that flew up to meet it.

Lightning flashed in the sky all throughout Estoll as deafening thunder drowned out all other sounds. The clash lasted but a second. With a noise like a terrible roar, the dragon fell to earth atop Izuna. The thunder went quiet, and the black cloud vanished from the sky as if it had never been. Once more, beams of moonlight filtered in through the broken roof.

It looked like the aftermath of a war. The building had been utterly obliterated. There was no sign anywhere that this had once been a mansion belonging to a noble family. The wood was burnt to a crisp, and even the metal fixtures were red-hot to the touch.

Izuna lay on the ground, arms and legs spread wide like she was trying to melt into the earth. Somehow, however, her body seemed unharmed. Aisha had used the Eyes of Judgment, one of the abilities of the Dragon Eyes, to strike only at Izuna’s armor. Most of the force of the attack had dissipated into the surrounding area.

The gold rings vanished from Aisha’s eyes. Dragging her weary body, she made her way up to Izuna, step by agonizing step. At last, her voice might just reach the girl.

“Hey...Izuna?” she said. “I’m sure I’m going to end up saying something hurtful to you again someday.” She spoke slowly, trying to say everything that was on her mind while Izuna listened, lying flat on the ground. “If I think something’s wrong, I’m going to say what I think. I can’t just quietly approve of anything you do.”

Izuna had quietly approved of the dolls—of Analissia—for a very long time. She had allowed herself to think that anything Analissia said and did was correct. It had been a very easy attitude to take. That was why she’d ended up retreating from reality into a world of dreams.

But it wasn’t right. Izuna was Aisha’s precious friend. No matter how much it hurt, the right thing to do would be to tell her honestly that what she was doing was wrong. And so, tell her she did.

“I know I make mistakes sometimes too,” Aisha said. “But when I do, I want you to fight me. I want you to show me right from wrong. That’s what arguments are for, I think. And...” She paused and looked Izuna in the eyes—her beautiful eyes that reminded Aisha of the night sky. “And I think that’s what it means to be friends.”

Aisha’s magic poured into Izuna, rousing her exhausted body. She sat up, her body trembling, and slowly opened her mouth. Aisha waited patiently for her to speak. “Aisha...” Izuna said fearfully. “Do you still...want to be friends...?”

“Of course,” said Aisha. “We are friends, Izuna.”

“Even... Even though I was so selfish...and threw a tantrum like a child...? Even though I’ve done so many horrible things...?”

“You didn’t do anything *that* bad,” Aisha said. “Didn’t I tell you? I’m older than you. It’s okay for you to accept my kindness.” Izuna still looked anxious, so Aisha continued. “I’ve done terrible things to you too, you know. Do *you* still want to be *my* friend?”

“Are you...okay with someone like me...?” Izuna’s voice trailed off miserably.

“Izuna,” Aisha began, trying to find the words to banish her friend’s fears and close the distance that had opened between them. “I *need* you.” She held out her hand. “Do you want to make up?”

“Y-Yes!” Izuna took Aisha’s hand and squeezed it tight. “Yes! Yes!!!” Tears shone like jewels as they streamed down her face. Aisha wiped them away until the downpour in Izuna’s eyes let up. Izuna clung tightly to Aisha, as if she never again wanted to let go. As if she wanted to be told it was all right to stay like this for just a little while.

Gradually, though, something dawned on Aisha. Something that had slipped her mind in the chaos. “Izuna...you’re naked.”

Izuna’s armor had been destroyed, and she apparently hadn’t been wearing anything underneath it. But fortunately, the only one here to see was Aisha.

Izuna was already aware, but it didn’t seem to bother her in the slightest. “I don’t mind if it’s you who sees,” she said. She sounded oddly happy.

A chill ran down Aisha's spine, no doubt just because of the cold night wind. She decided that she didn't mind Izuna's state of undress either—for the time being, at least—and held the girl tight in her arms.

Epilogue

“Th-This is incredible!” Izuna exclaimed, her eyes going wide with shock behind the bangs that kept them hidden. The potion Aisha had taken out from her implausibly tiny pouch had had a tremendous effect. Her wounds and fatigue were both completely gone, whisked away by the motes of light that surrounded her body.

“It’s one of Mistress’s items, after all,” Aisha said, pride clear in her voice.

“Your mistress again...” Izuna pouted. “She’s all you ever talk about.”

“I’m sure you’ll get along with her!” Aisha declared. “Mistress Nacht is a really kindhearted person.” She took a drink of a healing potion herself and retched. “Bleh! It’s bitter...”

“You don’t have to drink it,” Izuna told her. “It’ll have the same effect if you sprinkle it over your body.”

“Oh, that’s right!” Aisha followed Izuna’s advice. As her wounds vanished, she gave a small sigh. Then, breathing deeply, she made up her mind to get it over with. “Izuna...” she said. “There are some things I should tell you...” She had to tell Izuna the truth or else her friend would never move on with her life.

“All right,” Izuna said. “I’m listening. Go ahead.” It seemed she had been ready for this conversation ever since the power that had enveloped the city had suddenly vanished. Izuna had already made up her mind to move forward on her own.

So Aisha told her everything. She told her that Analissia had been the one behind her parents’ murder. That she had laughed at Izuna. That she had been using Izuna and nothing more. And then, she gave Izuna the message Analissia had left for her: *“If you hate me now, please don’t hesitate to kill me.”*

Aisha didn’t know why Analissia had wanted her to give Izuna that message. She wondered if it would have been better to keep it secret for the sake of her friend. But whatever it was that they were going to do about Analissia, it

needed to be Izuna's decision. The woman had lived with her and acted as her false family, after all. In Aisha's mind, that was enough reason to let her make the call.

"I get the sense you were waiting for me to tell you that," Aisha said. "Whatever you decide, Izuna, you'll have my support. But living in hatred is—"

"Don't worry," said Izuna, cutting her off. "I understand. Really, don't worry. I'll be all right as long as you're with me." Izuna slowly parted her hair, showing her eyes as she spoke. "My sister is very smart. She doesn't do things for no reason." Aisha saw Analissia as nothing but a villain, but perhaps Izuna had a different perspective on the woman. "Still, I should go see her at least. I won't understand anything if I don't talk to her." She clung to Aisha's sleeve, complicated emotions raging inside her. "I can't forgive her for what she did! But she was also kind to me. It was fake, but she treated me with love..."

Aisha could sense the turmoil in Izuna's heart. "Whatever decision you make, I'm on your side."

"I know. Thank you, Aisha."

Then, all of a sudden, something strange began happening in the sky, interrupting their conversation. "Nh!" Izuna cried. The first thing they saw was light. It was so bright that it threatened to burn their retinas, even from as high up in the sky as it was. Aisha's spell earlier had enveloped a portion of the sky and reduced the vast noble estate to ruins, but this spell made hers look like mere child's play. It was overwhelming. All of Estoll seemed to shake.

"Wh-What's th-that?!" Izuna stuttered, too overwhelmed by shock for her mouth to work properly. It was like her field of vision—no, the very sky itself—had been replaced. The moonlit night sky was shining as if it were midday.

"O-Oh!" said Aisha. "Don't worry! I think Mistress is just getting a bit carried away..."

Before their eyes was a great golden dragon, shining like the sun, its light reaching every corner of Estoll. Then, the great dragon's mouth opened wide in a roar. Aisha hurried to cover her ears as an explosion of sound impacted her whole body. That was just a shock wave, though; Aisha could only imagine how much power the attack itself had contained.

The shock waves rippled outward like an explosion. And then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the dragon vanished.

Izuna stared up, dumbfounded. “The sky...changed...” she said. And indeed it had. The clouds that had been drifting overhead were gone. The moons shone down from the clear sky above, seemingly even brighter than they had been before.

Aisha sighed. “Mistress...” she said, “please don’t forget that there’s a city beneath you...”

Aisha’s attitude only served to increase Izuna’s shock. “Wow, Aisha,” she said. “You act like you see this every day.”

The city was in chaos. Knights and priests and people of all vocations were running around in a panic, trying desperately to understand what was happening.

“Izuna, look!” said Aisha, pointing up at the sky. Something was falling—a person. There was no mistaking it. They were plummeting from the sky headfirst.

“A girl!” Izuna exclaimed.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What?!” Aisha stammered. “I-I have to catch her!” She called on the spirits of wind, and they caught the girl gently as she fell.

“Mrr...” the girl mumbled, unconscious. Her clothing was in tatters, exposing her skin, and her wide-open eyes were rolled all the way back into her head. It looked like she had passed out while screaming.

Aisha took the girl in her arms when she suddenly heard yet another voice. “Looks like things went all right on your end too, Aisha,” said Nacht. “I guess that’s a wrap!”

“Mistress!” Aisha cried, beaming with delight. She turned her face up to gaze in admiration at her beautiful mistress. Aisha took it all in—her long black hair fluttering in the breeze. Her clear, commanding eyes with their golden rings that shone like the light of the moons. Her unnaturally gorgeous body, and her dress that glittered with starlight. Anyone who beheld such a vision of beauty would surely have their heart stolen in a second. Aisha’s mistress had arrived.

“That’s...your mistress?” Izuna murmured fearfully.

“Um...Mistress?” Aisha asked. “Wh-What did you do to this girl?” The girl in question was currently passed out in Aisha’s arms, muttering words she didn’t understand.

“Ah,” Nacht replied with a smile. “She turned out to be a bit tougher than I anticipated, so I guess I forgot to pull my punches. Seems like I still have a lot to learn too!” To Aisha, it didn’t seem like a laughing matter at all. True, her battle with Izuna had been much the same, but Nacht’s magic had thrown all of Estoll into chaos. Even so, Nacht laughed happily as she regarded the scene around her. “No big deal! We can leave the cleanup to Tina. We are going to have a feast in celebration of friendships renewed.”

“Do we have a choice...?” Aisha asked, shooting Nacht a dirty look. Nacht took it in stride, ignoring the comment with a grin. Then, she stepped up to Izuna.

“Hm...” she said, looking the girl directly in the eyes. “They *are* lovely. I’m Aisha’s mistress. The name’s Nacht, but you can go ahead and call me your bestie.”

“I’m...Izuna,” Izuna said, lowering her gaze as she answered.

“No lowering your head,” Nacht insisted.

“I...”

“And no averting your eyes. Aisha said they’re beautiful. You should take pride in them. Even if all of humanity is mocking you behind your back, even if the entire city hates you, even if every last living being on the planet starts making fun of them, Aisha said they were beautiful! So try being proud for a change! Aisha’s opinion is worth more than anyone else in the entire world. Am I wrong?”

“No...!” said Izuna, looking Nacht in the eye. “You’re right!”

“Don’t forget that warmth,” Nacht said, smiling. “As long as you have that, you’ll never have to be alone again.”

“I won’t!” said Izuna without hesitation. Nacht nodded, satisfied.

“I’m really glad Aisha made a friend,” she said. “Take care of her for me, okay,

Izuna?”

“Y-You take care of her too!” The two shook hands as Aisha watched silently, hiding her embarrassment deep within her heart. But that didn’t matter. She was happy just seeing Izuna and Nacht shake hands.

“I hope you two get along well,” Nacht said. “As *friends*.” Perhaps it was Izuna’s imagination, but it seemed like Nacht had placed an unnatural emphasis on the word “friends.” It was like all the kindness from moments before had simply vanished.

“O-Of course!” said Izuna. “Aisha’s my best friend!”

Now that Izuna had stopped demurring, Nacht’s gaze became one of pure hostility. Sparks flew between them. Aisha began frantically looking this way and that, wondering what she should do. “Hmph,” said Nacht. “Take good care of *my* Aisha.”

That time, she had placed the emphasis on “my.” In fact, now that Izuna was looking, Nacht had taken Aisha’s hand in hers at some point.

Aisha was happy, but she couldn’t bear the deadly looks the two were giving each other. “P-Please, you two!” she said. “Please try to get along!”

“Aisha...” Nacht said. “All right, then! I told you I wouldn’t turn down a request from you, no matter how much I hate it. I’m here for you, after all!” She took Izuna’s hand with her free one, still holding on to Aisha’s with her other.

“Huuuh?!” was all Aisha could say.

“There’s a number of things we should discuss,” Nacht said.

“Yes...” said Izuna. “I have a lot I want to ask too.”

They kept their fierce gazes fixed on one another, the pressure building higher and higher until Aisha interposed herself between the pair. “Please!” she shrieked, her voice echoing in the night. “Would you two *please* at least *try* to get along?!”

Afterword

When the sample copy of volume one of *Did I Seriously Just Get Reincarnated as My Gag Character?!* showed up at our house, my mother was overjoyed. She declared right away that she was going to show the entire family.

I pleaded with her desperately. “It’s embarrassing!” I said. “Please have mercy!” But it was not to be.

“Until I see my grandchild’s face, you have no right to refuse,” she proclaimed.

Perhaps I should look into my marriage prospects sooner rather than later.

Hello! You may call me Kanade Otonashi. If it’s your first time, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance! If you’re reading this after finishing the first volume, thank you!

This volume was written around a central theme: “the inherent nobility of cute girls trying their hardest.” As the heroine of the story, Aisha had to try her hardest in all sorts of ways. I wrote a whole new episode featuring Princess Theresia, a character who wasn’t in the web novel at all, and revised and revised and revised until the book had been just about rewritten from scratch. It really does feel like an entirely new story. I hope that those of you who read the web novel will enjoy seeing how things go in this version of the story as well.

The next volume is going to be something of a celebration of Nacht and Aisha’s relationship. I hope you look forward to seeing what I have planned.

Last but not least, acknowledgments. I would like to thank my editor, O, as well as everyone else involved with this project. Thank you to azutaro for the beautiful illustrations, and thank you very much to everyone reading this book right now. I owe you my gratitude.

I hope to see you again when volume three is released!



Theresia

SECOND PRINCESS OF SINDORIA.
SAID TO BE THE KINGDOM'S FINEST JEWEL.

Yuri

LADY KNIGHT OF THE ORDER OF THE WHITE LILY.
PERSONAL GUARDIAN OF THE PRINCESS.

Did I Seriously Just Get
Reincarnated 2
as My **Gag Character?!**



Erin

DAUGHTER OF THE LORD OF CALAMITY.

Analissia

PRIME MINISTER OF ESTOLL.
OF DEMONIC BLOOD.

Izuna

YOUNG GIRL WITH STARRY DEMON EYES.

Bonus Short Stories

A Contract with a Devil

The Devil of Envy. A name so horrifying that even the bravest would cover their ears in fear were it ever uttered. One of the tyrants of the Underground, with absolute power over one of the seven deadly sins. The most useless and meaningless being of all, and thus, as a devil, in possession of supreme strength.

Or so she was meant to be. Right now, however...

“Levi...?” Aisha asked, not quite able to bring herself to look directly at the devil. “Why are you wearing that outfit?”

For some reason, Levi was wearing a very risqué maid outfit that exposed her shoulders, belly, and thighs as she busied herself with a pot of tea. “Why don’t you ask that mistress of ours,” she grumbled. “I can’t believe this. Forcing a greater devil like myself to wear this ridiculous outfit... You have some nerve!”

Nacht, however, was completely unperturbed by Levi’s remarks. She could tell she was only trying to hide her own embarrassment. “It looks good on you, though!” she said. “It’s one of the items my perverted supporters made for me, after all—the Housemaid’s Uniform (Night)!” Admiring the frankly indecent maid uniform, Nacht took a leisurely sip from her cup of tea.

“B-But why are you having Levi parade around in front of you in such a sh-shameful outfit, Mistress?!” protested Aisha.

“What, jealous?” Levi teased. “Envy suits you, little Aisha. But never mind that. There’s no defying one of Mistress’s orders. Such is the sad fate of a devil bound to a contract by force. Why not try having some empathy for me instead?”

“Mrr...” Aisha mumbled. “You have to do whatever Mistress says, don’t you, Levi? Even when the children at the orphanage were swarming all over you...” Nacht had ordered Levi to serve as a playmate for the children at the

orphanage. She had been very popular, as they were allowed to play with her to their hearts' content, even if Levi ended up positively caked in mud. "You hardly seem like a devil at all sometimes."

"Gah!" Aisha hadn't meant anything bad by that last sentence, but it struck Levi like an arrow through the heart all the same. "H-Ha ha ha..." she laughed, putting on her most convincing sinister grin. "Don't be silly. That was nothing more than a performance meant to trick those foolish mortals. The best devils know that if you can get a human to lower their guard, capturing their heart is like taking candy from a baby."

"RReally?!" Aisha exclaimed. "Are you saying you've been playing games with me this whole time? E-Even when you gave me those sweets?"

"Of course! It was all an act!"

"And you pouring me a cup of tea, right at this moment...?"

"A-An act, naturally!"

"Th-Then, are you only *pretending* to obey Mistress's orders?!"

Levi puffed out her chest. Aisha's innocent words seemed to be doing a decent job of reviving her deflated self-confidence. "Ha ha ha! Who can say? But if she keeps giving me such ludicrous, self-indulgent orders, perhaps you'll end up seeing some of my true nature as a devil after all."

"Weh!" Aisha exclaimed. "Th-That would be terrible!"

A wicked smile crossed Levi's face, but before she could say anything, Nacht interrupted. "There's no need to worry, Aisha."

"Weh...? What do you mean?"

"Levi loves me, you see," Nacht said plainly.

For once, the ever-talkative Levi was at a loss for words. Her face flushed a brilliant shade of red. "Wh-Wh-Wh-What foolishness! M-M-M-Me?! In l-l-l-love with Mistress?!"

"Levi..." Aisha said. "So it's true?" Even Aisha could see through her reaction. She eyed the devil sharply. Levi could feel her control over the conversation rapidly slipping away.

“Wh-Why would I be in love with Mistress?!” Levi protested. “Sh-She orders me around, and won’t take no for an answer, and makes me do all *kinds* of senseless things! She’s the vilest, most selfish person in the entire world!”

“So...you love her?” Aisha confirmed.

“Well,” Nacht said, “to be fair, it’s more like the kind of love you feel for a family member. Here, let me tell you a story from back in the day.”

“N-No, Mistress!” Levi pleaded. “Anything but that! I’m supposed to be a sinister and powerful and mysterious character! You’re going to ruin my image!”

Nacht smirked like a devil herself. “That reminds me, Levi. Remember that time you dared to lay a hand on my Aisha?”

“But I did the job perfectly, didn’t I?!” Levi objected. “How deep does your envy go, Mistress?! There’s such a thing as *too much*, you know!”

Ignoring Levi like she was nothing more than a buzzing insect, Nacht began her story...

‡

She was weak. And among devils, weakness was a sin.

The weak were not permitted to reside within the Underground. That was why, no matter how much power a devil was born with, they would use all their cunning, perseverance, and cruelty in an endless quest for greater and greater dark strength.

That world had no place for her. As she was, the only thing that awaited her was death. Every step she took only left her with further wounds. The grim reaper was close at hand. That was all that a devil who could not devour her fellows could do—merely go quietly to her grave.

“So jealous...”

She was in envy of the strong.

“So jealous...”

She was in envy of the wise.

“So jealous...”

She hated her useless, wretched body with all of her heart. She was envious even of the devils who, drunk on their own ambition, found themselves instead devoured in the brutal struggle for supremacy. Once she started on this train of thought, there was no stopping it.

“Aaaaaaahhh!!!” She screamed. “I’m so, so, so, so, so jealous!!!” Levi was jealous of everything her eyes could see. But even more than that... “It should all be mine,” she muttered, sitting down and curling in on herself. She would just stay here, she decided. She stopped moving entirely, even beyond her usual idleness. Encountering anyone would only increase her pain.

Envy was the most useless and meaningless emotion of all. She knew that, yet, for some reason she didn’t understand, her misery refused to cease. And in time, it gave rise to a power of her own. A useless, meaningless, cruel power. The unique skill False Idol. She had become the Devil of Envy.

One day, a light fell from the night sky—a light that did not belong to any star. It burned its way through the atmosphere, bright with flames as it made its way toward her. She met it with her own powerful magic, firing beams of destructive light that filled the sky, causing the ground to crumble where they struck.

“A human...?” The devil peered out at the sky. “The impudence!” Since becoming the Devil of Envy, she had never once known defeat. After all, her power let her become anyone or anything she desired. She grew to enormous size, her body becoming lithe and flexible like a snake’s and covered in the scales of the most resilient wyrm in the world. She grew fangs that could shred all that exists to pieces. She copied every technique she could think of...but the small creature before her somehow eluded her grasp.

“Half human and half wyrm actually, you copycat,” said the girl.

“What?!” Leviathan, the devil, was speechless. The girl before her was shrouded in a destructive aura of primordial night that clung to her like a lover’s embrace—a dress with no defined form. The aura seemed to flicker, and then, faster than Leviathan could follow, the girl was gone. It was as if she had simply teleported.

Leviathan lashed out with her body like a whip, gnashing her all-piercing fangs. She breathed fire that burned with the force of envy and conjured magic from the heavens...but nothing worked. She couldn't hit the girl. Before this girl, she was still the powerless devil she had been long ago.

"Pitiful devil," the girl said. "Now, let's finish this. *Ars Draconis: Nacht Atem!*"

A dark vortex engulfed her massive body as it swam through the air, swallowing her up completely. It raged and raged, and when it was finished, all that was left of her was a lowly devil. She stood there, small and shivering.

"So...am I nothing after all?" she asked, smiling miserably as tears threatened to come pouring from her eyes. "What am I? *Who* am I? I just... I just don't know..."

Sometimes, when she wanted power, she would cast off her body and take the form of a great wyrm. When she wanted favor, she would cast it off and take the form of a beautiful woman. When she wanted love, she would cast it off and take the form of a child. Again and again, she rejected her body as unwanted and unneeded. Again and again, if she wanted or was jealous of something, she would simply abandon herself. She was the envy of all, and yet she herself was nothing. And now, it was all over. Tears streamed down her face—the tears of a devil.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" The girl, however, simply laughed. "In that case, become my minion."

"Excuse me...?"

"Hard of hearing? I said I'm going to make you my minion." The girl leered down at her from high above. It seemed Leviathan was not going to be allowed to refuse this offer. "I'll put you to good use. You should be grateful." And with that, too weakened and battered to resist, Leviathan found herself forced into a contract.

"See?" the girl said. "Now you *are* something—my minion! Isn't that great, Levi? Aww...you're crying for joy?"

"What?!" Levi protested unconvincingly. "N-No way! These are, um...t-tears of pain, Mistress..."

Black and White

These are the events of a day long ago. Atop the dried earth floor of the Outer Cafeteria sparring grounds stood a mountain of corpses.

“Take *that!*” Kurone cried, sending yet another one of Nacht’s self-proclaimed royal guards flying into the pile.

Her opponent, though, seemed strangely happy about the affair. “Thaaank yooou!!!” he cried as he sailed through the air. It was a surreal sight, but to Nacht, who had been in the guild for quite a long time, it was nothing out of the ordinary.

As the duel announcer’s voice proclaimed her victory, Kurone wiped the sweat from her brow. She looked unsatisfied.

“That was quite the show, as always,” Nacht said. “But you seem to be in a mood today, Kurone. Is something up?”

“I guess...” Kurone answered. “You wanna try too, Nacht?”

“No thanks.” Nacht glanced over at the defeated remains of her supporters. “I’d rather not end up in that pile over there.”

“Even if I send you flying somewhere else?”

“Meaning that you plan on sending me flying either way, I take it.”

Nacht didn’t need to ask what was wrong. If Kurone, who was loath to show her emotions, was so clearly upset, there was only one person who could conceivably be responsible.

“Stupid sister...” Kurone mumbled, confirming Nacht’s suspicions. “This is all her fault...”

Kurone was a woman of few words under most circumstances. But on the subject of her sister, Shirone, it was hard to shut her up. She grumbled and complained on and on like a drunk at a tavern, expressing her deep dissatisfaction.

“So basically,” Nacht said, summing it all up, “Shirone’s at a party with her university friends, and you’re jealous.”

“That’s not it at all!” Kurone protested. “My airheaded older sister is out in the middle of the night getting drunk with men! I told her she was just asking to get abducted and offered to go with her, but she just kept making excuses! Like ‘some upperclassmen from my club will be there,’ or ‘there’s going to be lots of women there too,’ or ‘I’m not a heavy drinker anyway.’ I just can’t get through to that girl...”

Kurone didn’t seem to realize, but she was more than a bit obsessed with her sister.

“My sister’s an idiot, you know, so we decided to go to university in Kyoto instead of Tokyo. But then she failed the test and had to go to a private school in a different prefecture entirely! I haven’t gotten to eat her homemade cookies in so long... We promised to meet up every day in the game if we couldn’t see each other in real life, you know. Stupid sister...”

Nacht’s royal guard, it seemed, had been the victims of Kurone’s attempt to work out her stress.

These are the events of another day long ago. Nacht’s self-proclaimed royal guard had formed a wall, crying out on the verge of tears.

“M-M’lady Shirone! Please! Heal us!”

“Medic! Medic!!!”

“We need healing, m’lady! We’re very nearly done for!”

There were hardly any healers in Outer Cafeteria. In all of Nacht’s leveling party, only Shirone was any good at it. The others in the party were shouting desperately, but Shirone didn’t seem to be listening. She was staring off into space. With her seemingly out of the picture, things were looking bleak for this routine leveling excursion. The guards on the front line were very nearly on their last legs.

“What is this, a new style of idle gaming?”

“Hah. In that case, should we kick the deadweight from the party? *We’re* all giving it our all here!”

“No, no, no! We need healing, remember?! We need to swallow our pride and grovel on the ground like the pigs we are!”

“Right!” two others agreed. But their idea turned out not to be necessary. Shirone suddenly grabbed hold of Nacht’s sleeve, looking up at her with tear-filled eyes.

“Shirone?” asked Nacht. “What’s up this time?”

“N-Nacht!” Shirone sobbed. “K-Kurone... K-Kurone is...!”

“So basically,” Nacht said, summarizing the sobbing speech that followed, “you told your little sister off for being a shut-in and it turned into an argument?”

“Kurone is a university student, you know!” Shirone protested. “But she still spends all day every day playing games! She doesn’t go out, she doesn’t clean her room, she eats cup noodles every day...she’s even been cutting class! But even so, she’s doing better at school than me...” she sobbed. “My sister’s so brilliant...”

Of course it was Kurone. The bright-spirited Shirone only sobbed this miserably when her little sister was involved.

“But!” Shirone went on. “E-Even if it is her day off, a university student shouldn’t be going to the convenience store in her old high school gym uniform! And if I don’t keep an eye on her, she doesn’t clean her room for weeks at a time! I’m worried about her, you know?! I can’t believe I wasn’t able to get into the same school as her. I feel so awful about it. But then she went and said she doesn’t need her big sister looking after her, and it turned into a huge fight...”

Shirone didn’t seem to realize, but she was every bit as obsessed with her sister as Kurone was.

“I need to make cookies...” Shirone grumbled. “I’m logging off...” So saying, her avatar vanished from the world.

Nacht gave a weary smile. Even for twins, those sisters resembled each other a bit *too* much.

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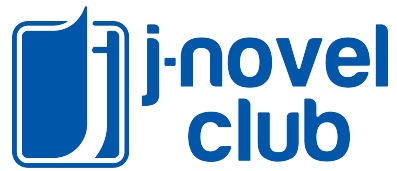
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Did I Seriously Just Get Reincarnated as My Gag Character?! Volume 2

by Kanade Otonashi

Translated by Meteora Edited by Adam Haffen

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